

therefore, at my failure to find Henry's sister in Charlottesville seems obvious.

The trails of John Henry have brought unsatisfactory results, and the question of what became of him is still not answered. His leaving the Big Bend neighborhood was certainly not to the tune of a brass band, and it is very doubtful that he left at all. He had about an equal chance to go or stay. The fear of his ghost in the tunnel and the wide popular belief in his death there, where escape at best was only a gambling possibility, may be regarded as lending some value to the ballad record of the event. Fortunately, a full account of the career of John Henry is not necessary for an answer to the question of his existence and the reality of his drilling-contest.



John Raybern Zierold

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THE JOHN HENRY HAMMER SONG

A

Mrs. Sidney Wilson, Minnehaha Springs, W. Va. Mrs. Wilson obtained this version from her brother, a man well acquainted with construction camps in the South.

This old hammer, - - huh,
Killed John Henry, - - huh;
This old hammer, - - huh,
Killed John Henry, - - huh;
This old hammer, - - huh,
Killed John Henry, - - huh;
Killed him dead, - - huh.

Ain't no hammer, - - huh,
In these mountains, - - huh;
Ain't no hammer, - - huh,
In these mountains, - - huh;
Ain't no hammer, - - huh,
In these mountains, - - huh;
Rings like mine, - - huh.

Take this hammer, - - huh,
And give it to the walker, - - huh;
Take this hammer, - - huh,
And give it to the walker, - - huh;
Take this hammer, - - huh,
And give it to the walker, - - huh;
For I'm goin' home, - - huh.

I told Hattie, - - huh,
To whip - a those children, - - huh;
I told Hattie, - - huh,
To whip - a those children, - - huh;
I told Hattie, - - huh,
To whip - a those children, - - huh;
Make 'em mind, - - huh.

'Cause the penitentiary, - - huh,
Is full o' people, - - huh;
'Cause the penitentiary, - - huh,
Is full o' people, - - huh;
'Cause the penitentiary, - - huh,
Is full o' people, - - huh;
Won't raised right, - - huh.

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JOHN HENRY ON THE CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO RAILWAY

A factual basis for the Henry tradition on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in West Virginia required the employment of hand labor and machinery together, if not continuously at least on occasion, in its construction from 1870 to 1873. If rock-drilling on the road was done altogether by hand drills or altogether by steam drills, no chance for a conflict between the two kinds of work obtained, and the tradition can have no real basis there. That the opportunity, however, for such a conflict did actually exist has more than legendary support.

In the second half of the 19th century hand labor was employed widely in tunnelling, and in some cases the hand drill was used exclusively.¹⁾ Steam drills came into fairly general use in the third quarter of the century, particularly in heavy tunnelling, both in Europe and America. On the Mt. Cenis Tunnel they were put "to work in full during 1861", and remained to the completion of the tunnel ten years later.²⁾ Their next successful use was in the Hoosac Tunnel, where the Burleigh drills were introduced in 1866.³⁾ In 1870 they were introduced into the Nesquehoning Tunnel, with marked success.⁴⁾ From 1872 to 1875 the Ingersoll drills were employed with the Burleigh compressors successfully in building the Musconetcong Tunnel.⁵⁾

About this date hand drills and steam drills were brought together on several lines. Notable among these was the Cincinnati Southern, with twenty-six important tunnels. In some of them hand drills were used in the heading, and in others on the bench, supplemented by steam drills.⁶⁾ In actual practice, of course, the two types of drilling were employed together wherever the steam drill was tried out in tunnelling during its period of development, a half-century or more.

Their use together on the Chesapeake and Ohio, at some time between 1870 and 1873, is shown by the testimony of L. W. Hill, a soldier of the Confederacy, who is better known as "Dad" among railroad people around Hinton, West Virginia, where he was living when he made his report in September, 1925:

¹⁾ Port Henry Tunnel on the New York and Canada, 1874-76, and Lick Log Tunnel on the Western North Carolina Railway, 1870, were built by hand labor. Tunnelling, pp. 976, 982. In Mount Wood and Top Mill tunnels, built in 1889, "all drilling was done by hand". Journal of the Western Society of Engineers, II (1897), 49.

²⁾ Tunnelling, p. 130.

³⁾ Ibid., p. 165 ff.

⁴⁾ Ibid., pp. 165, 974.

⁵⁾ Henry S. Drinker, resident engineer of the Musconetcong Tunnel. The Railroad Gazette, VII (June 5, 1875), 228 ff.

⁶⁾ Tunnelling, p. 966 ff.

I was conductor 35 years on a freight train on the C and O Railroad between Hinton and Clifton Forge. I am now retired and on the pension list of the C and O.

I got one of my eyes hurt by a piece of rock flying in it when I was helping to build Lewis Tunnel, which is not far from Big Bend Tunnel, just above here on the C and O Railroad. I have been troubled with my eyes ever since, but I lost the sight of my best eye first, and now I can hardly see.

A steam drill was used for a while in building Lewis Tunnel, and I ran the stationary engine that furnished steam for it. The drill could be used on a bench only, and was not a success there, and it gave way to the hand drills. Later I ran the stationary engine for lifting rocks in the shaft and pumping water.

In one way or another many people were killed in building Lewis Tunnel: many were killed from careless blasting. There was a graveyard built there along with the tunnel, and one in Big Bend Tunnel too.

Bob Jones was the best steel-driver in Lewis Tunnel, but not much better than some of the others in there with him. They usually sang a song they had composed on their work, or the foremen, or some 'loose' women around the camps. They called one of them Liza Dooley, and made a song on her.

This report of the hand drill as the important tool at Lewis Tunnel puts the type of drilling there in line with that employed generally on the road. A newspaper of the state gives "from Big Sandy to White Sulphur, a distance of at least 200 miles, the clink of the drill-hammer ... heard from early in the morn to eve."⁷) The published official records of the road make no exception to the general use of hand labor in that work.⁸)

Mr. Hill's connection with machine-drilling on the road is highly significant. With the steam drill established in tunnelling by 1870, and the general airing of its marvels in engineering journals and local newspapers,⁹) those responsible for the extension of the Chesapeake and Ohio across West Virginia could not escape giving it a trial. The belief of Shanley, the contractor of Hoosac Tunnel, that the expense of hand labor there would have been "fully three times the cost of machine-drilling",¹⁰) and Hoosac Tunnel was well on toward completion by 1870, could not be ignored by the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway whose bonds were being sold on Wall Street.¹¹) Their report indicates full use of all up-to-date methods:

Beyond the great want of trained mechanical labor at that time in the Southern States, the tunnel experience upon the work of the several lines consolidated into the Chesapeake and Ohio cannot be said to have departed

⁷) *Wheeling Intelligencer*, Wheeling, W. Va., Oct. 3, 1871.

⁸) *Tunnelling*.

⁹) *Wheeling Intelligencer*, Dec. 30, 1870. *Lynchburg Daily Virginian*, Sept. 22, 1871.

¹⁰) *Tunnelling*, p. 244.

¹¹) *The Weekly Register*, Point Pleasant, W. Va., March 3, 1870.

materially from the routine of construction of other first-class mountain roads of the same period.¹²⁾

Everything favored the introduction of steam drills on the road between 1870 and 1873. Through the development of the compressor system at Mt. Ceniz Tunnel, their successful use in tunnelling had been noted in Europe for nine years. They had been used with marked success for four years in the Hoosac Tunnel of Massachusetts, and had just been introduced with great promise into the Nesquehoning Tunnel. They were therefore a necessary part of the equipment for building first-class mountain roads of that period.

That steam drills were actually used at Lewis Tunnel, as reported by Mr. Hill, is shown by newspaper accounts during 1871. In January of that year, the *Richmond Dispatch* noted that "at the Lewis tunnel, or Jerry's run, the contractors have put the steam drills in operation".¹³⁾ In November following, Charles Nordhoff, formerly editor of the *New York Post*, who at the time was making a trip along the Chesapeake and Ohio across West Virginia and writing a series of letters on the progress of work on the road, referred to Lewis Tunnel "in which several of Burleigh's drills are at work".¹⁴⁾ These records cover a period of practically nine months.

Both types of tunnelling, then, were employed together on the road between 1870 and 1873, thus satisfying the major requirement of a factual basis for the Henry tradition in its construction. That innovations of this sort among hand labor would be followed by drilling-contests between the old and the new was the thing to expect. That such a contest, the basic episode of "John Henry", actually took place as celebrated in popular report has every reasonable influence from these circumstances in its favor, and should not require much further evidence for its authenticity.

If the steam drills put to work at Lewis Tunnel in January, 1871, were the Burleigh drills mentioned in November of that year, and were operated continuously for almost nine months, Mr. Hill would seem to be in error; but he has the support of the chief engineer of that work, that they failed: "Subsequent to War, Burleigh rock-drill tried in the tunnel, but unsuccessfully."¹⁵⁾ This statement not only establishes Mr. Hill, who had a part in testing the machine, but throws damaging light on the assumption that the steam drills mentioned in the *Richmond Dispatch* as having been put to work at the tunnel in January were the Burleigh drills referred to by Nordhoff in November following, and favors the inference that several steam drills were experimented with at Lewis Tunnel, those

¹²⁾ Tunnelling, p. 484.

¹³⁾ Jan. 21, 1871. The *Richmond Dispatch* is in conflict with the Chesapeake and Ohio "records that steam drills were first introduced in construction on Lewis Tunnel the latter part of April, 1871." John Henry, p. 49. Dr. Johnson states in his next paragraph that the C and O files of reports from their engineers and contractors of this period have been destroyed by fire.

¹⁴⁾ *New York Weekly Tribune*, Nov. 8, 1871.

¹⁵⁾ Tunnelling, p. 965.

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¹⁷⁾ Tunnelling, p. 965.
¹⁸⁾ The Greenbrier
¹⁹⁾ C. S. ("Neal") Miller,

mentioned in January and November, and possibly in April, and very probably others before and after these dates.¹⁶⁾

It follows that the steam drill in all probability was tried out elsewhere on the road at the time, and Big Bend, the largest tunnel on the line, had certain advantages to offer. The rock of Big Bend was different from that of Lewis Tunnel,¹⁷⁾ and different results might have been expected from the machine, with the promise of a larger number of sales upon its adoption there.

So-called documentary proof for the steam drill at Big Bend Tunnel seems not to exist. The only possible reference of the sort known appears in an account of the work there about the time the tunnel was completed: "Unavoidable contingencies, such as foul air, breaking of machinery, &c., have delayed this part of the work considerably."¹⁸⁾ That breaking of machinery" can have such value is very doubtful. It would mean too great reliance on the steam drill to accord with known facts. In the absence of anything better for an understanding of the circumstances at Big Bend, testimonial data must be allowed.

Neal Miller,¹⁹⁾ son of Andrew Jackson Miller, a native of the community, lives about a mile up Hungart's Creek, which joins Greenbrier River at the east end of Big Bend Tunnel. He was a member of a large family. Three of his brothers "followed" the railroad. Two are on the Norfolk and Western, one an engineer and the other a painter. The third was an engineer on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway, and a few years ago "his train almost smothered him to death in Big Bend Tunnel," with the result that he died about four months later. In his neighborhood Neal Miller is regarded as having a good memory and being honest.

Mr. Miller says that he worked in Big Bend "off and on", carrying water and steel for the workmen, and knew John Henry there.

I saw John Henry drive steel in Big Bend Tunnel. He was a great singer, and always singing some old song when he was driving steel. He was a black, rawboned man, 30 years old, 6 feet high, and weighed near 200 pounds. He and Phil Henderson, another big Negro, but not so high, were pals, and said that they were from North Carolina.

Phil Henderson turned the steel for John Henry when he drove in the contest with the steam drill at the east end of the tunnel. John Henry beat the steam drill because it got hung in the seam of the rock and lost time.

Dave Withrow, who lived with his wife at our home, was the foreman in charge of the work on the outside of the tunnel where John Henry

¹⁶⁾ Such was the experience at Hoosac Tunnel. The Brooks, Gates, and Burleigh machines were introduced there in June, 1866, and replaced by the Burleigh drill in November following. Tunnelling, p. 159 ff. About 40 of these machines were discarded at Hoosac. Did the manufacturers try to sell them in the South?

¹⁷⁾ Tunnelling, p. 965.

¹⁸⁾ The Greenbrier Independent, June 1, 1872.

¹⁹⁾ C. S. ("Neal") Miller, Talcott, W. Va.

beat the steam drill, and Mike Breen was the foreman on the inside of the tunnel there.

The steam drill was brought to Big Bend Tunnel as an experiment, and failed because it stayed broke all the time, or hung up in the rock, and it could be used only on bench drill anyway. It was brought to the east end of the tunnel when work first commenced there, and was never carried in the tunnel. It was thrown aside, and the engine was taken from it and carried to shaft number one, where it took the place of a team of horses that pulled the bucket up in the shaft with a windlass.

John Henry used to go up Hungart's Creek to see a white woman, -- or almost white. Sometimes this woman would go down to the tunnel to get John Henry, and they went back together. She was called John Henry's woman 'round the camps.

John Henry didn't die from getting too hot in the contest with the steam drill, like you say. He drove in the heading a long time after that. But he was later killed in the tunnel, but I didn't see him killed. He couldn't go away from the tunnel without letting his friends know about it, and his woman stayed 'round long after he disappeared.

He was killed all right, and I know the time. The boys 'round the tunnel told me that he was killed from a blast of rock in the heading, and he was put in a box with another Negro and buried at night under the big fill at the east end of the tunnel. A mule that had got killed in the tunnel was put under the big fill about the same time.

The bosses at the tunnel were afraid the death of John Henry would cause trouble among the Negroes, and they often got rid of dead Negroes in some way like that. All the Negroes left the tunnel once and wouldn't go in it for several days. Some of them won't go in it now because they've got the notion they can still hear John Henry driving steel in there. He's a regular ghost 'round this place.

His marks in the side of the rock where he drove with the steam drill stayed there awhile at the east end of the tunnel, but when the railroad bed was widened for double-tracking they destroyed them.²⁰⁾

The Hedrick brothers, George, seventeen, and John, twenty-three, were living with their father within a few hundred yards of Big Bend when work began on the tunnel in 1870, and remained there while it was under construction. George still lives there, but for the last few years John has lived with his daughter's family in Hinton, eight miles west of the tunnel.²¹⁾

George Hedrick says that he did no work in the tunnel, but that he was continually around where the men were at work, and knew "what was going on":

My brother John helped to survey the tunnel and had charge of the woodwork in building it. I often saw John Henry drive steel out there. I saw the steam drill too, when they brought it to east end of the tunnel.

²⁰⁾ Mr. Miller made his report in Sept., 1925.

²¹⁾ The testimony of George Hedrick, Talcott, W. Va., was obtained in Sept., 1925, and that of John Hedrick, Aug., 1927. The latter was visiting his son in Kentucky when I made my first trip to the tunnel in 1925.

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but I didn't see John Henry when he drove in the contest with it. I heard about it right after. My brother saw it.

My memory is Phil Henderson and John Henry drove together against the steam drill. That was the usual way of driving steel in the tunnel.

I saw John Henry drive steel. He was black and 6 feet high, 35 years old, and weighed 200 or a little more. He could sing as well as he could drive steel, and was always singing when he was in the tunnel -- 'Can't you drive her, -- huh?'

The Hedrick brothers are sober men of good practical sense and judgement. George is about six feet tall, stands erect, and weighs around two hundred pounds, and must have been a superior man forty years ago. John is not quite so tall, but has a larger frame and muscle. He was twenty-three when the tunnel was begun, and was unquestionably well fitted for a responsible job among the gangs there. He speaks with the authority of a tunnel boss:

I was manager of the wood-work in putting through Big Bend Tunnel, and built the shanties for the Negroes there in the camp. The first work at Big Bend Tunnel was making the survey, and I helped with that. Then men came to put down the shafts, and took rock from them 50 feet down to send away for contractors to examine when they were making contracts for the work on the tunnel. Menifee put down the first shaft. When he came I went with him to help him find the place. I worked there till the tunnel was all completed.

I knew John Henry. He was a yaller-complected, stout, healthy fellow from down in Virginia. He was about 30 years old, and weighed 160 or 170 pounds. He was 5 feet 8 inches tall, not over that.

He drove steel with a steam drill at the east end, on the inside of the tunnel not far from the end. He was working under Foreman Steele, and he beat the steam drill too. The steam drill got hung up, but John Henry was beating him all the time. I didn't see the contest, because it was on the inside of the tunnel, and not very many could get in there. I was taking up timber, and heard him singing and driving, and he was beating him too.

John Henry stayed 'round the tunnel a year or two, then went away somewhere. I don't remember when he left. He had a big black fellow with him that drove steel, but he couldn't drive like John Henry.

John Henry was there 12 months after the contest. I know. He was there when the hole was opened between shaft 1 and 2. Henry Fox put the first hole through, and then climbed through it. He was a foreman, and got the watch that Johnson offered for the first man to get through. He was from shaft 2, and people on the other side pulled him through and tore off all his clothes.

I don't believe a single man got killed at Big Bend Tunnel at work. A boy fell in the shaft, and one died from foul air. A man was killed in Little Bend Tunnel,²² but none in Big Bend.

These three witnesses are giving direct testimony, not popular or hearsay reports. They are not ballad-singers and general repositi-

²² A tunnel on the line a short distance west of Big Bend Tunnel.

tories of oral traditions, but represent the stable citizenry of a conservative community. In a court or forum of that locality, they would have the support of good character and general reliability in matters of dispute coming under their observation.

The explanation Mr. Miller makes of the steam drill at Big Bend and the subsequent use of the engine from it recalls Mr. Hill's experiences with the machine at Lewis Tunnel. His account of John Henry's death and burial is of a hearsay character, and has only the value of a report at the time. He is not alone in making this report, however, and his account of the tragic tone of the place will seem more real eventually. Mr. Miller is no apologist, and no hero-worshipper, for John Henry or anybody else, as his testimony indicates. He has the characteristic mountaineer attitude toward the Negro, and regards the famous steel-driver as rather vicious, "just another Negro", superior of course and able to claim his woman when he was present, but remembers that he was not always present. His reference to Henry's woman as "almost white" was but a cautionary after-thought to temper the blow "white woman" for the moment, and has no other value in his report. Later he talked more fully about the woman, whom he knew for several years. She lived in a little house about two miles up Hungart's Creek, and often made long trips visiting construction camps, usually of miners, along the railroad. Confirmation of this account may be had from G. L. Scott, previously mentioned, who remembers her house, her name and fame, and the man who "stood her" at Big Bend Tunnel.²³)

In his statement that John Henry sang "Can't you drive her, -- huh?" George Hedrick makes a good claim for his acquaintance with the steel-drivers at the tunnel, and for the correctness of his memory. A few months after Big Bend was completed, the line

²³) O. F. Morton says of Negro slaves in Monroe County, which included the Big Bend community at the time the tunnel was begun: "The servants in the 'bighouse' looked down on the field hands, but both house and field servants looked down on the poor class of whites." *A History of Monroe County*, p. 185 ff.

In 1878, Page Edwards, a Negro living at Big Bend Tunnel, became jealous of his wife, a "bright mulatto woman of handsome appearance," and killed her. In 1907, Elbert Medlin, born in the larger Big Bend community about the time the tunnel was under construction, killed his wife because she seemed to prefer the other man. Medlin's father was a light mulatto, and his mother a "white woman of low and degraded instincts." They claimed that they were married in Ohio. J. H. Miller, *History of Summers County*, pp. 788, 807.

Anne Royall, a native of Monroe County, gives an example of a family of white girls over in Virginia having children by Negro men, and adds from her "poor ignorant driver" of the coach, "There were several instances of their having children by black men." *Sketches of History, Life, and Manners in the United States (1826)*, by a Traveller, p. 30 ff.

For the race problem in Virginia, see J. H. Russell, "The Free Negro in Virginia, 1619-1865," *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, XXXI.

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they did with him,

a) The Mount-
a) The Gree-
a) The Rail-
a) John Hen-
Watchman. I-
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"Can't you drive her home, my boy?" was published as having been sung by the miners in building the tunnel.²⁴⁾

John Hedrick makes even a better claim for his memory of the tunnel. He is correct in saying that "Meniffee put down the first shaft," and in Meniffee's purpose in doing it.²⁵⁾ Building shanties for the workmen, surveying, and sinking shafts for rock to be used in contracting for its construction characterize the first work at the tunnel, facts that will not be questioned. Fox²⁶⁾ and Steele²⁷⁾ were foremen at the tunnel, and the former was in charge when the opening was made from shaft one to shaft two, as Mr. Hedrick states.

Testimony of this sort is not altogether hearsay stuff, and can hardly be denied value in showing the employment together of the two kinds of labor at Big Bend. These men are certain that they saw the two types of drills at the tunnel, and that a contest took place between them. Their evidence is of about equal value.

In their statements for Henry's presence, they are supported by two other witnesses, George Jenkins and D. R. Gilpin, who claim that they worked in the tunnel. These two men were not there when the tunnel was begun, but came later and saw less.

Mr. Jenkins²⁸⁾ says that he is a native of Buckingham County, Virginia, that he went with his father, a blacksmith, to Big Bend soon after the tunnel was started, that he worked at first as "tool-boy", and that later his father got him a job in the shop to "sharpen steel and other tools":

John Henry was there when I went to Big Bend, and I remember he was under Jack Pasco from Ireland. He was very black, and he'd weigh about 160. Always singing when he worked. He was a sort of song-leader. He was 30 or 35 years old.

I don't know what he did when he wasn't at work in the tunnel. I don't know when he left the tunnel or where he went. No; I don't know anything about him driving steel against a steam drill. The tunnel was all hand work.

Jim Brightwell ran the hoisting engine at shaft 2, and my brother fired for him. Captain Johnson gave a barrel of liquor when they knocked through the heading from shaft 2 to 3. Mose Selby stabbed John Hunt that day, but didn't kill him. I saw Hunt in Roanoke a few years ago.

I saw one man killed in the tunnel. He was taking up bottom when a rock fell from overhead and killed him dead. I don't remember what they did with him, sent him home to his people I suppose.

²⁴⁾ The Mountain Herald, Hinton, W. Va., Jan. 1, 1874.

²⁵⁾ The Greenbrier Independent, Jan. 22, 1870.

²⁶⁾ The Railroad Gazette, Nov. 2, 1872.

²⁷⁾ John Henry, p. 30. Dr. Johnson quotes from Border Watchman. I have not been able to find the files of this newspaper, but other newspapers of the time often quoted from it.

²⁸⁾ Testimony of George Jenkins, 75 years old, of Montgomery, W. Va., was obtained in Aug., 1927.

When the mules came out of the tunnel some of them were blind as a bat. One went blind and stayed blind. Most of them got all right after a day or so. They put a cover over their heads for a while.

They burnt lard oil and blackstrap in the tunnel for lights.

After Big Bend was in I flagged on the work train between White Sulphur and Hinton about a year. Then I went with my father to work on a tunnel at King's Mountain, Ky. No; I knew John Henry only at Big Bend. I don't know what became of him.

Mr. Gilpin²⁹⁾ is on the pension list of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway. He came to Big Bend, he says, from Knoxville, Tenn., with his father, a well-digger who had been successful in several states of the South before the Civil War in sinking wells through rock under water. His father was brought to the tunnel by Johnson, contractor, whose efforts to put down shaft one had been checked by water rising in it, and remained as a sort of boss or director of drilling and blasting in the heading.³⁰⁾ Mr. Gilpin says that he worked along with his father, carrying water and steel for the workmen.

He remembers John Henry, and describes him as black, about six feet tall, and weight "as much as 200 pounds, but not fat", with "thick lips and the prettiest set of white teeth I ever looked at". He adds that Henry, like the others, usually kept his shirt off when he drove in the tunnel:

I know that he was from North Carolina, for he used to get Pearce, my brother-in-law and a foreman in the tunnel, to write letters for him to his people there. Pearce liked John Henry because he was sensible and used good manners, and keen and full of good jokes, and he could sing and pick a banjo better than anybody else I ever saw.

My mother used to help out when anybody got hurt in the tunnel. She'd come with clean cloths and medicine. She ran a bearding house there at the tunnel, and baked bread for John Henry. He cooked the rest of his food at the camp, but he couldn't bake bread and Pearce asked my mother to do it for him. I'd often carry it to him at his camp, and he'd give me a little extra for carrying it.

I've seen John Henry playing cards, but I never saw him gambling, and he didn't swear like the other Negroes did when he was at work.

My half-brother, Jim Wimmer, drove steel in the tunnel, and he drove with John Henry when he could get the chance, because John Henry was a good worker at driving steel, and he was sensible and safe, a man of good judgment, with a good eye. There was not so much danger in driving with him in the heading like there was with some of the other drivers. John Henry was a reliable man in danger or in a risky job.

When the first light hole was opened from shaft number one to the east end of the tunnel, I dipped the liquor for the steel-drivers. Every crew tried to put their boss through the hole first, and they fought and

²⁹⁾ Testimony of D. R. Gilpin, Hinton, W. Va., was obtained in Sept., 1925.

³⁰⁾ John Gilpin is remembered in the Big Bend community as a "good Negro-driver".

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yelled like mad men. John Henry was a mighty powerful man that day, I tell you. When they pushed my father through the hole, they pushed me through after him, and almost tore off one of my legs in doing it. Then Superintendent Johnson gave me a suit of clothes because I got hurt.

I don't know a thing about John Henry driving steel in a contest with the steam drill, and don't think I ever saw one at the tunnel. Hand drills were used in the tunnel. They were using an engine at shaft number one to raise the bucket up when we moved to the tunnel, but they didn't have any steam engine or steam drill in the tunnel.

The last time I saw John Henry, who was called Big John Henry, was when some rocks from a blast fell on him and another Negro. They were covered with blankets and carried out of the tunnel. I don't think John Henry was killed in that accident because I didn't hear of him being buried, and the bosses were always careful in looking after the injured and dead. They were afraid the Negroes would leave the tunnel.

I don't know what happened to John Henry after that accident, though. He may have left for a while and then come back again, but I can't say. I always thought John Henry died in the tunnel, but I didn't know anything about his death. I don't remember seeing John Henry after the day the rocks fell on him. I might have found out what happened to him if I had tried then, but we were not allowed to go round the camps asking questions about such things. Any man who walked around and talked about the hard life in the tunnel was allowed to stay there about two days, and that's all.

Mr. Gilpin remembers that Henry was the "singinest man I ever saw", but remembers only a few stanzas of his song:

Tell the captain, - huh, I am gone, - huh,
Tell the captain, - huh, I am gone, - huh,
Tell the captain, - huh, I 'am gone, - huh,
Big John Henry, - huh,
Big John Henry, - huh,
Big John Henry, - huh,

Seven others were built in the same style on these lines: "The captain can't get me", "Shoo fly up, shoo fly down", "Shoo fly all 'round the town", "This old hammer a-singing", "This old steel a-ringing", "This old sweat a-rolling", and "I am getting dry". Mr. Gilpin says that John Henry always sang "I am getting dry" when he wanted water to drink, and that as water boy he was supposed to carry it. Henry used the "huh", or grunt, to mark the strokes of his hammer.

Mr. Gilpin says that he got his "education" at Big Bend Tunnel. He talks as enthusiastically on Big Bend times as Confederate soldiers often do about the Civil War. Unlike Mr. Miller, he is a hero-worshipper, and John Henry and the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway are his heroes. He once looked at a picture of Jack Johnson, the Negro prize fighter, with full chest and muscled arms, and saw only his John Henry of Big Bend days, just as the Confederate veteran saw only his comrades of 1860 in the marching brigades of 1917. He has kept several little reminders of his connection with the road,

and takes pride in wearing its service pins. Big Bend is at the heart of his world, and he knows the place well.

He knew the two doctors who lived at Big Bend at different times while the tunnel was under construction, their families, and not a little of them afterwards. He remembered accurately a surprisingly large number of the foremen and other officials at the tunnel. He knew the engineer who drove the first train through the tunnel. He said his name was South Mack, who is not infrequently remembered in the locality as Seth Mack. He explained how Mack lost his thumbs, by inserting them into a break somewhere in his little engine, after turning it over and getting caught under it, to check the escaping steam to keep from being "scalded to death" before he could be rescued.

The reason Mr. Gilpin offers for Johnson's bringing his father to Big Bend is plausible enough. Water rising in the tunnel was one of the difficulties the engineers had in building it.³¹) He may not have dipped liquor for the men when they opened up the tunnel from shaft one to the east end, but very probably somebody did. The water boy was the proper functionary when liquor became a substitute for water, and it was used freely on such occasions there.³²) The Border Watchman leads one to believe that Mr. Gilpin could have reported a casualty list on this occasion: "We learn that the hands on the East approach to Big Bend Tunnel and those driving the 'heading' east from Shaft 1, having knocked out the rock between them, tried to knock out each other. Several parties were severely stabbed."³³)

The song "Shoo Fly" was widely sung on the minstrel stage of the early seventies. A Virginia newspaper observed: "Many persons who are not in the habit of frequenting negro minstrel shows have expressed a desire to know what are the words of a song to which reference is so often made in the newspapers, and the chorus of which salutes the ear in every public place. It is a nonsensical medley without rhyme or reason ... immensely popular with the masses."³⁴) The Governor of West Virginia was reported as singing a part of the song when he "Broke Ground on the C. & O. R. R." in that state.³⁵) Moreover, "miners hoarsely singing" and "sweat a-rolling" belong to the education of Mr. Gilpin at Big Bend. Such echoes, although some of them may not be factual, suggest that he is not entirely a man of fiction.

On my first trip to Hinton, in 1925, I mentioned "John Henry" to Mr. Gilpin, without pointing out specifically any of its details, but he seemed not to know the ballad. He remembered, with difficulty,

³¹) The Greenbrier Independent, Jan. 28, 1871, gives an account of the use of sumps and pumps to keep the water out of the tunnel.

³²) John Henry, p. 30.

³³) The Greenbrier Independent, Feb. 19, 1872.

³⁴) The Staunton Spectator and General Advertiser, Feb. 1, 1870.

³⁵) Wheeling Intelligencer, April 18, 1870.

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only a few stanzas of the steel-driver's song. On a second visit about two years later, I again introduced the ballad, and characterized it rather fully. Mr. Gilpin commented thus: "John Henry was always singing. He would sing about his woman, giving her his hammer, wrapping it in gold, gold at the White House, and giving it to his woman, sitting on his mammy's knee, watermelon smiling on the vine, tell the captain I am gone, and like that." But he did not reproduce a single stanza of the ballad, and seemed not to be able to.

The question of Henry's woman had been raised, but no mention made of the White House, although allusion to it is found in several texts of the ballad. And "gold at the White House" is unique in the tradition. He explained: "The White House is where the President lives. John Henry and the other Negroes there in the tunnel used to sing about it, and about going there. They used to sing about Fred Douglas up there too."

He knew Henry's woman, and several others equally important in building the tunnel, and contributed rather full accounts of Lu ---, Liza Ann ---, Kate ---, and one called "Liza Dooley", but thought this not her real name. Some of them claimed to be half Indian. One had long, straight, black hair, and another red hair. One was a fortune-teller and banjo-picker, a woman of unusual vivacity, a sort of pagan beauty, who played at dances and on other occasions of jolification, not infrequently for slightly mixed crowds. He remembered the following stanzas from her singing:

I'm going down to town,
I'm going down to town,
I'm going down to Lynchburg town,
To carry my baccar down.

Baccar selling high,
Selling at a dollar a pound,
And nobody wants to buy.

I pawn my watch,
And I pawn my chain.
Oh go 'long Liza, poor gal,
Poor little Liza Jane.

Up old Liza, poor gal,
Up old Liza Jane.
Up old Liza, poor gal,
Up old Liza Jane.

She lost her lover
And found him again.
Up old Liza, poor gal,
Up old Liza Jane.

She lost her lover
In the bottom of the sea.
Up old Liza, poor gal,
Up old Liza Jane.

WHAT BECAME OF JOHN HENRY?

If the famous steel-driver was a real man, a flesh and blood man, and actually took part in a drilling-contest at Big Bend, as the testimony shows, one would like to know what became of him. The witnesses do not know. Miller and Gilpin seem to think that he died at the tunnel. John Hedrick is quite certain that he did not, and says that he "went away somewhere".

A strong belief in Henry's death at Big Bend is shown by the popular reports presented in the second chapter of this study. The ballad mentions his death there. Among the Negroes of the community nothing seems more real than his ghost. The ghost's driving steel in the tunnel is highly significant of the manner, as well as the fact, of his death, and modern ghosts are supposed to have such values.¹⁾ Bridge and tunnel ghosts may not always be, if ever, full adoptions, or made from the whole cloth. And building Big Bend Tunnel made possible the only plausible occasion for starting such a belief, factual or fictitious. The character of the tradition seems to favor his actual death there, from a drilling-contest, or in some other way.

The witnesses for Henry are certain of their acquaintance with him at the tunnel, and the conclusion that he died immediately after, and as a result of, the drilling-contest, that reported by Miller and the Hedricks, would seem to dispose of their testimony as lacking authority. This does not necessarily follow.

Among them only Gilpin claims the sort of acquaintance with the steel-driver that would make a confusion between him and another Negro at Big Bend hardly possible, and Gilpin was late in getting to the tunnel, probably almost a year after it was begun. If the drilling-contest occurred early in the work there, as shown by the testimony, and Henry died immediately as a result of it, the steel-driver who took his place among the tunnel Negroes might have resembled him very closely, and was almost certainly called John

¹⁾ A case in point was reported for a tunnel in the state about six months before Big Bend was begun. Hempfield Tunnel, near Wheeling, was "full" of ghosts of murdered men. They were reported as having been seen in the act of being murdered, as the men killed there were. "At the mouth of the tunnel is a sequestered spot known as Berry's Hole. Its name is significant, as its record shows it to be the watery grave of many poor fellows. In the memory of many of our readers the history of Schaffer, the blood-thirsty and brutal murderer, who expiated his crimes on the scaffold at Parkersburg, is still fresh. The slaughter of one of his victims took place in the tunnel is well known and is supposed to have immediate reference to the appearance of the ghost last week ... Other deeds of this kind [in this tunnel] are too well known to bear repetition." *Wheeling Intelligencer*, July 19, 1869.

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Henry. He would have been the only John Henry there known to Gilpin and Jenkins, and eventually best known to Miller and the Hedricks, and they might easily have accepted him as the hero of the contest because they had had no particular reason to observe the original John Henry at all closely. Tragedies at the tunnel were not matters for open discussion, and this might explain the failure of Gilpin and Jenkins to hear anything said about the contest. This might also explain Gilpin's failure to remember any stanza of the John Henry song mentioning the fact of his death, or to remember a single stanza of the ballad.

The theory that John Henry died in a second drilling-contest at Big Bend seems less probable, and could hardly have happened without the knowledge of the witnesses for the steel-driver at the tunnel. The introduction, however, of a second machine before the tunnel was completed would have meant a second drilling-contest if Henry won the first without any serious injury to himself, provided he was there at the time.

The drilling-contest established at Big Bend by the testimonial data probably occurred in the summer or fall of 1870. The first work was done on the tunnel in January of that year, beginning the last few days of the month, and J. M. Logan states that he worked four months there before the shafts were in and then returned to Ivanhoe, and that he heard of the contest between Henry and the steam drill when he went back to Ivanhoe. His departure from the tunnel, therefore, was in the summer or early fall, and he heard of the contest soon after. The fact that it occurred at the east end of Big Bend, according to the testimony, shows that it took place early in the work on the tunnel, and that was the first section of the tunnel completed. Between the summer or fall of 1870 and the completion of the tunnel in June, 1872, was a period of practically two years in which a second drilling-contest could have taken place.

The steam drill was at Lewis Tunnel in January and November, and possibly in April, of 1871, and also very probably in 1870 about the time it was being tried at Big Bend. The probability is that the drill characterized as a failure at Lewis Tunnel, but mentioned as being in use there on three occasions covering a period of almost nine months, was not the same drill but two or more drills of different makes, or the same drill operated each time with a different compressor, by way of experiment. Such tests, as well, may have been carried out at Big Bend. The two tunnels were constructed by different men under different contracts, and their character differed in the obstacles offered for the machine. Big Bend was drilled through "hard red shale", and Lewis Tunnel through "hard sandstone with some little slate".²⁾ The failure, therefore, of the drill at Lewis Tunnel would not have meant its failure at Big Bend; and the second drilling-contest there, with the death of the steel-driver as a result, was at least possible and may have occurred.

²⁾ Tunnelling, p. 965.

In an effort to account for the discrepancy between the testimony and the popular report of Henry's death as a result of the drilling-contest, the theory that the steel-driver met his death in some other way at the tunnel and that the report of the event became confused with that of the contest through oral transmission seems more probable. It leads to an inquiry as to the actual conditions under which the tunnel was built.

The testimony is highly suggestive but inadequate for a full understanding of the tragic circumstances at Big Bend, as becomes increasingly evident as one examines the construction of heavy tunnels in Europe and America during the second half of the 19th century. The startling number of casualties from building Mt. Ceniz and the Hoosac tunnels³⁾ indicates the incorrectness of such a statement as that of John Hedrick that none was killed in Big Bend. Miller's report that bodies of Negroes killed in the tunnel, along with that of a mule, were buried in the big fill at the east portal is much less improbable. Many of the foremen and other officials on the road had been in the Confederate Army. It was not always convenient there to bury the dead properly, or to advertise the casualty list as a means of keeping up the morale of the forces. That it was necessary to protect the morale of the Negroes at Big Bend and that those in charge were not always equal to the task can hardly be doubted. A brief account of the circumstances there will show that the place was not in the least inviting. Miller's statement that all the Negroes refused to go into the tunnel for several days on one occasion seems to be common knowledge in the neighborhood. It was the only detail the widow of Jeff Davis, previously mentioned, could remember at all distinctly about the construction of the tunnel when I visited her in September, 1925.⁴⁾

Nordhoff states that the laborers on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway were mostly Negroes, ignorant, and "much crowded together" in the tunnels.⁵⁾ The number of such laborers in Big Bend during the two years and a half of its construction was probably about 1,000. The number for Musconetcong Tunnel was 1,000,⁶⁾ and that for Hoosac, 900.⁷⁾ Big Bend is about one-third longer than the former, and one-third of the length of the latter. But the labor of Hoosac Tunnel was "chiefly of the kind termed 'skilled labor', the underground workers being, for the most part, regularly bred miners (a large porportion of them being of the very best Cornish miners)."⁸⁾ Big Bend was built with ignorant, superstitious Negroes "much crowded together" in the tunnel.

³⁾ P. 69.

⁴⁾ A similar act on the part of laborers at Midland Tunnel was noted in the *Wheeling Intelligencer*, March 8, 1871.

⁵⁾ *New York Weekly Tribune*, Oct. 18 and Nov. 1, 1871.

⁶⁾ *The Railroad Gazette*, VII (June, 1875), 241.

⁷⁾ *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, XCI (1871), 148.

⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, XCI, 148.

The following lines, under the title "Big Bend Times",⁹⁾ published with apologies by a local newspaper about six months after the road was completed across the state, was written presumably by an employee at the tunnel, and is the only published account from the inside of Big Bend known to exist:

Big Bend times now pass before me,
Tunnel scenes of long ago;
With the loose rock hanging o'er me,
More dangerous far than human foe.
Days that knew no time of leisure,
Days from working never free;
When the hopeful dreamed of pleasure,
When the tunnel through should be.
Fancy hears the hammers ringing - -
Sounds that now my dream annoy - -
And the miners hoarsely singing
'Can't you drive her home, my boy?'
Hears the bosses loudly swearing
At some idler whom they see,
Who plainly is not caring
When the tunnel through should be.
What though looser roofs beset me,
Though down deeper shafts I go;
Yet I never will forget thee,
Number two, of long ago.
And when railroad life is ended,
Oh! what pleasure we could see,
If we owned the means expended,
That the tunnel through should be.

That Big Bend was not altogether a pastoral scene has support from the inside of Mt. Ceniz. In that tunnel "one was almost smothered so great was the heat; the smoke from the blasts became so thick that the light of the lamps was visible no farther than a few steps." The writer describes blasting there: "Suddenly an infernal noise burst upon us from the end of the gallery. One would have said that ten thousand hammers were falling simultaneously on their anvils. A sharp whistling sound made itself heard above this clamor, piercing you to the very marrow."¹⁰⁾ Clouds of "yellow smoke come pouring through the tunnel in such density and volume as to be positively painful."¹¹⁾ The inferno of St. Gothard was hardly more inviting: "As the work progressed the temperature rose and the air became more vitiated, until visitors were rarely permitted to enter because of the sheer danger of being in such an atmosphere, and the horses on the job died at the rate of ten a month. The scene in the scantily lighted tunnel grew to resemble an inferno, men going about

⁹⁾ The Mountain Herald, Hinton, W. Va., Jan. 1, 1874.

¹⁰⁾ Every Saturday, Oct. 14, 1871.

¹¹⁾ Wheeling Intelligencer, Dec. 30, 1870.

He was a negro from Tennessee. The last time he heard of him he was a steel driver somewhere in Kentucky."

Another contributor, Mr. Wallace,¹⁰⁾ testifies to the sort of experience that qualifies him to speak with authority on the Henry vogue:

I am a steam shovel operator or 'runner', and have heard steel drivers sing John Henry all my life, and there are probably lots of verses I never heard as it used to be that every new steel driving 'nigger' had a new verse to John Henry.

I never personally knew John Henry, but I have talked to lots of old timers who did. I have been told by some old Rail Road construction men that John Henry and John Hardy were the same man and by some others that they were not, but I believe that John Hardy was his real name. He actually worked on the C & O Ry. for Langhorn & Langhorn and was able to drive 9 feet of steel faster than the steam drill could in Big Bend Tunnel. Then later he was hanged in Welch, W. Va., for murdering a man. After shifting out the 'chaff' think I can assure you the above is correct.

I have heard the two songs sung mostly in the same section of the country that is, West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina, seldom elsewhere except by men from one of the above states. I have worked all over the South, South West, and West, and have heard the John Henry song almost ever since I could remember, and it was an old song the first I ever remember of it...

This shift of the drilling-contest to Big Bend Tunnel satisfies the ballad account of the event, but the belief in Henry and Hardy as the same man starts something else. The report, however, is purely a popular one, and it seems that the Langhorn construction company had their first contract on the road near Big Bend Tunnel in 1894,¹¹⁾ about a quarter of a century too late for the origin of the tradition in the construction of the tunnel. Earl Smith,¹²⁾ who contributes a version of "John Hardy", indicates that Mr. Wallace is not alone in identifying Henry as Hardy: "I think you will find John Hardy and Henry the same man, under different names."

Objections to this identification of John Henry are too numerous to be included in this work. A good example of them is that of Miss Hayes,¹³⁾ of Kentucky: "I am telling you all I know about John Henry. He was a negro from the state of Virginia. He was not related to John Hardy. He could lift a four ton car lift so much that his feet would go in the ground up to his ankles. He was killed in the C. & O. tunnel." Miss Hayes has probably confused the steel-driver of Virginia with one of the lifters of Kentucky or Tennessee.

¹⁰⁾ C. J. Wallace, Charleston, W. Va.

¹¹⁾ G. L. Scott, Talcott, W. Va., states that he furnished the Langhorns timber for a construction job on the road near the east end of Big Bend in 1894.

¹²⁾ Of Gates, W. Va.

¹³⁾ Isabell Hayes, Langley, Ky.

An example equally typical is that of C. H. Board¹⁴⁾ of Virginia: "John Henry was a black man. He was not related to John Hardy. Him and Milton Brooks was little related. He was from the state of South Carolina. He died driving steel."

The confusion of John Hardy with John Henry is one of the problems in the Henry tradition. How well he measures up to the popular character of John Henry can be easily shown.

Lee Holley, of Tazewell, Virginia, who claimed to be 67 years old when he made his report in 1925, offers a strong objection to such an identification, an objection with a kick:

I've lived 'round here all my life. I've been acquainted with the camps in this section forty or fifty years. I remember seeing John Hardy pretty often, and know all about him.

He was black and tall, and would weigh about 200 pounds, and was 27 or 8 when he was hung at Welch over in McDowell County. He was with a gang of gamblers 'round the camps. Harry Christian, Lewis Rhodes, Copper Boots, and Ben Red, and Jim Mason, and others besides were all about as bad as he was. They were all loafers and gamblers, and robbed the camps at night often after pay-day. Harry Christian was hung for killing Bill Crowe, and most of the gang got killed sooner or later.

My Cousin Bob Holley drove steel with John Henry in Big Bend Tunnel. John Henry was the famous steel-driver there in building that tunnel. I heard Bob talk about him several times, but Bob's dead now. He's been dead ten years. I know John Hardy didn't drive steel in Big Bend Tunnel; he couldn't because he wasn't old enough when it was built, and he didn't work anyway. He got his living gambling and robbing 'round the camps.

That this account of Hardy is in the main correct is shown by newspaper records from that section on the occasion of his execution, January 19, 1894, for the "cold blooded" murder of Thomas Drews, also colored, at Shawnee Camp, near Eckman, McDowell County, West Virginia, early in 1893. His conviction followed on October 12th of that year. The hanging took place in sight of the jail in Welch, and his body was buried near the spot.¹⁵⁾ Who Hardy was, or where he was from, is not known.

The real and popular personality of Hardy, as it appears in his documentary, testimonial, and ballad record, is that of an outlaw and robber, the Negro desperado around the construction camps of southern West Virginia near the close of the 19th century, and has very little in common with that of Henry, the heroic workman. Their confusion in oral tradition is hardly a phenomenal matter; the surprising thing

¹⁴⁾ Montea, Va.

¹⁵⁾ *Wheeling Daily Register*, Wheeling, W. Va., Oct. 13, 1893; Jan. 20, 1894. The later reference explains why Hardy killed Drews, in a disagreement over a crap game: "Both were enamored of the same woman, and the latter proving the more favored lover, incurred Hardy's envy, who seized the pretext of falling out in the game to work vengeance on Drews."

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¹⁹⁾ H. W.
²⁰⁾ Hunter
²¹⁾ V. E.
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is that for a while ballad scholars found occasion to add to this confusion.¹⁶⁾

Mr. Redwine described his John Henry as "not a real black man, but more of a chocolate color", and introduced a white man, a superior steel-driver from Tennessee, who, he thinks, was named Duffin, and who, with the aid of bad and stale air, forced his champion to the wall. This event, real or fictitious, may have some bearing on the popular belief in John Henry as a white man from Kentucky or Tennessee.

Two reports from North Carolina are definite on the question of Henry's color. Mr. Kelley¹⁷⁾ writes: "I have heard old men talk about John Henry that knew him. He was born in Tennessee and was a white man. His steel driving buddy was Ben Turner.¹⁸⁾ But where he worked I don't know." Mr. Webster¹⁹⁾ adds: "The contest between John Henry and the steam drill took place in the Big Ben Tunnel on the C. & O. Railway ... He bet a thousand dollars that he could out do the drill, and did so, but died shortly afterwards. He was a white man." Mr. Webster fails to say where Henry got the thousand dollars.

Hazel Underwood,²⁰⁾ of West Virginia, reports the Henry tradition in her family:

My father has often told me about John Henry. He says he was a man of about 35 years old, strong built, had muscles was supposed to be like iron. He drilled holes in the big rock cliffs with his strong arms and his two hammers one in each hand day after day.

There is no mistake about his being a white man. Papa says his last drive was made in the big ben tunnel on New River. Father says he has heard when he was a boy all about him and learned the song when he worked in the log camps, but had forgotten it till he heard part of it on a Record we have, it is just a part of it. Mamma and Pa says they can't believe this is all.

This account has a popular ring, and somewhat less authority than that of Mr. Gregory,²¹⁾ another West Virginian, who reports the "old original song of John Henry", and who claims that John Henry was a white man.

Mr. Roberts,²²⁾ of the same state, along with his account of Henry as a white man, represents him as doing something besides work:

¹⁶⁾ See "John Hardy", *Philological Quarterly*, IX, 260 ff.
¹⁷⁾ J. H. Kelley, Harrisburg, N. C.

¹⁸⁾ Is it at all probable that Joe Turner had something to do with the belief in Henry as a white man and his connections in Tennessee? See Odum and Johnson. *The Negro and His Songs*, p. 206 ff. W. C. Handy. *Blues: An Anthology*, p. 40 ff. (I fail to find that an "ideal is hinted at" in Odum and Johnson's text of "Joe Turner", or Handy's idea that in this text "Joe is supposed to have been a convict himself").

¹⁹⁾ H. Webster, State Hospital, Morganton, N. C.
²⁰⁾ Huntersville, W. Va.

²¹⁾ V. E. Gregory, White Sulphur Springs, W. Va.
²²⁾ George W. Roberts, Sweetland, W. Va.

John Henry was a white man, an American born English by birth. His weight - 240 lbs at the age of 22. The muscle of his arm was 22 inches around. Many times have I seen his woman but never John Henry personal, but have worked in the mines for years with the old Welshman that sharpened tools for him by the name of Billy McKenzie.

John Henry was a native of Virginia and did actually kill himself driving steel at the Big Ben tunnel on the C. & O. R. R. in the year of 1873. He was in the penitentiary for killing a man and the contractors got him out to drive steel. He was no relative of John Hardy at all.

I am near 70 years old, and I was a miner for a great many years in the Kanawha Valley at Paint Creek after the C. & O. was built, and that is the place I used to see John Henry's wife a little ugly freckle face woman. She would come around the mines where the work was going on.

Mr. McKenzie's widow²⁰⁾ says she does not remember that her husband ever spoke of Henry or his wife in her presence. The "freckle face woman", however, will appear several times in a later chapter. She has value here only as a possible influence in the belief in John Henry as a white man and a criminal.

The same belief is reported from Virginia and Kentucky. Harvy Hicks²¹⁾ writes:

John Henry was a white man they say. He was a prisoner when he was driving steel in the Big Ben tunnel at that time, and he said he could beat the steam drill down. They told him if he did why they would set him free. It is said that he beat the steam drill about two minutes and a half and fell dead. He drove with a hammer in each hand, nine pound sledge...

This is a popular report, and shows for Virginia more than an individual belief in Henry as a white man with a past. That from Kentucky is somewhat different. Mr. Barnett,²²⁾ who claims a career "working on railroads and 'round the coal-mines", says that he has always heard that either Henry or Hardy was a white man and a "ruff'an" from Kentucky.

Mr. Thompson,²³⁾ a merchant, with contacts of another sort, has heard of Henry and Hardy in Tennessee:

Having been born and raised in the state of Tennessee and, therefore, in sufficiently close contact with the negro element there, it happens that I have heard these songs practically all of my life, until I left that section six years ago...

I have been informed that John Henry was a true character all right, a nigger whose vocation was driving steel during the construction of a tunnel on one of the southern railways. I heard the John Henry song long before I did John Hardy. It has always been my understanding that John Hardy was a western character, probably a train robber.

²⁰⁾ An elderly woman who divides her time among her children of Hinton and Montgomery, W. Va.

²¹⁾ Evinston, Va.

²²⁾ W. P. Barnett, of Magoffin County Ky.

²³⁾ B. E. Thompson, Sutton, W. Va.

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He undoubtedly understands the "western character" to be a white man.

Two other contributors, both of West Virginia, characterize Hardy as a white man. Mr. Peters²⁷⁾ "can not say" about Henry, but explains that Hardy was a "white man lived in Logan County this state. He killed a man by the name of Vance²⁸⁾ over on the Big Sandy River in a log camp." Dr. Cox obtained from a certain Mr. Walker a "current report" in southern West Virginia "concerning a John Hardy who was a tough, a soloon frequenter, an outlaw, and a sort of thug. He [Mr. Walker] thinks this John Hardy was a white man, and is sure that he was hanged later on for killing a man in McDowell County or across the line in Virginia."²⁹⁾

In a few of their songs, Henry and Hardy seem to have rather close white companions. A blue-eyed woman is the apparent cause of the outlaw's troubles in two versions of "John Hardy", one from North Carolina and one from Kentucky,³⁰⁾ and the steel-driver takes leave of his blue-eyed "baby" in a Virginia text of the John Henry song.³¹⁾ Although questions may be raised about this motif as showing a belief in the two ballad figures as white men, it falls in line with the testimonial data, and this angle to the Henry tradition cannot be ignored.

The race of Hardy has been determined by his identification as the Negro desperado hanged in 1894 in southern West Virginia, but his confusion in oral tradition with John Henry and a notorious white outlaw of that section must have an important bearing on the belief in Henry as a white man, and possibly as a criminal also. Hardy might well be the contact man. Mr. Walker reported a white John Hardy, a "sort of thug", hanged for murder in McDowell County or across the line in Virginia, and Mr. Barnett has always heard that either Henry or Hardy was a "ruff'an" from Kentucky. The identification of this man is important.

In 1925 Ben Hardin was featured in a newspaper of that locality. Mr. Morton, a small boy at the time of Hardin's execution, writes:

Ben Harden -- many of our older citizens will remember this distinguished criminal who was hanged at Tazewell Courthouse on June 28, 1867, for the murder of Sanderlin Burns, who also was a Kentuckian and horse drover. Harden proposed to Burns to swap saddles, in a back alley, and asked Burns how he would trade. Burns replied to him and said 'I will swap just as though you had none' ... Harden left the scene and went to some one and got a double-barrelled shotgun ... and shot Burns. Harden was indicted at the May term of the circuit court, 1867, and was

²⁷⁾ J. M. Peters, Huntington, W. Va.

²⁸⁾ This may be a confusion with Abner Vance, a Baptist preacher, who killed Lewis Horton in that region. See *Folk-Songs of the South*, p. 207.

²⁹⁾ *Journal*, XXXII, 510.

³⁰⁾ Appendix, p. 137. Campbell and Sharp. *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, p. 257.

³¹⁾ Appendix, p. 99.

tried ... The jury brought in a verdict of guilty of murder in the first degree. After sentencing Harden to be hanged the Judge asked him if he had anything to say, and he responded, 'If this had been done years ago it would have been better for me and many others.'³²⁾

Two of these older citizens have made pertinent statements about the outlaw. John McCall, who "saw it all and remembers it as if it were yesterday", says his name was John Benjamin Harden. Samuel Spurgeon, who was also at the hanging, states that he "went by the name of Ben Hardin usually", and was "sometimes called John Hardin, too, and even John Hardy or Ben Hardy, but his real name was John Benjamin Harding." He remembers that Ben Hardin was a bad man, "with long black hair and a wicked look". Mr. McCall remembers that the murderer rode to "his hanging in a wagon seated on his coffin". They agree that the rope broke, and that he had to be hanged the second time. Their account of his spectacular taking-off suggests that one might expect him to gain high place in the popular repertoires of that locality.

This testimony has the support of the Clinch Valley News and other newspapers of the time:³³⁾ One correspondent became rather dramatic in his "Execution of a Hardened Wretch".³⁴⁾ If anything further was necessary to put Ben Hardin on the honor roll of his profession, it followed in his ten-thousand-word "Autobiography", with a caption notable for its omissions:

Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin Harden, executed at Tazewell C[ourt] H[ouse] on the 28th of June, 1867, for the murder of Dennison T. Burns, the 16th day of April, 1867. Startling Confessions! Boys, take warning! Fate of the spoiled child, the disobedient boy, the roguish lad, the stealthy house-robber, the dashing highwayman, the daring horse-thief, the twofaced friend, the unprincipled intriguer, the successful swindler, the heartless seducer of female innocence, and the cold-blooded assassin of seven defenceless and unsuspecting victims.³⁵⁾

Nothing is known of Ben Hardin, except the events connected with his execution.³⁶⁾ He claimed to be from Kentucky, and was hanged for killing a man, not in McDowell County, but across the line in Virginia. That he is the white man in the Henry tradition seems almost certain, although others, such as the white steel-driver from Tennessee and the "freckle face woman", cannot be entirely ignored, certainly not in their respective localities. Yet, in the nature of things, even an approximate measure of such influences cannot be made.

³²⁾ Bluefield Daily Dispatch, Bluefield, W. Va., Aug. 30, 1925.

³³⁾ Lynchburg Daily Virginian, Lynchburg, Va., April 27, 1867.

³⁴⁾ Ibid., July 4, 1867.

³⁵⁾ Clinch Valley News, Tazewell, Va. Copy of extra edition in 1867, and subsequent to the execution of Ben Hardin, now in my possession. Its files begin around 1900.

³⁶⁾ For the court records of Hardin's trial, see John Newton Harmon. Annals of Tazewell County, II. Fuller account of the outlaw may be found in my article: "Ben Hardin", Philological Quarterly, X, 27 ff.

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The age of the Henry tradition, as noted in testimonial and documentary accounts, should prepare the way toward its place of origin. But, unfortunately, several of the reports are too indefinite on that score.

The following is an example:

I was reared in South Carolina, and there I often heard the colored men, while driving with heavy hammers, sing this much of the song in question, which seemed to be the chorus:

'This is the hammer that killed John Henry, but can't kill me;

This is the hammer that killed John Henry, but can't kill me.'

I heard one man relate to another that John Henry was a negro convict (possibly of the state of South Carolina) who at that time was hired out to a quarry company, that John was such a powerful man a bet was made on him and a race was staged with the steam drill. The drill beat him ten inches in a day, and that night John Henry died.³⁷⁾ Another of the sort comes from Mrs. Susan Bennett:³⁸⁾

Wish to say that there was a man of that day in making the big ben tunnell that whipped the steam drill down. I live in about 25 miles of the tunnell and it is as true as the song Pearl Bryant or Jessie James or George Alley and you may write to the Bureau of Information and get the History of John Henry and his captains name. We have 3 records of Johnie so I will close and listen at him drive that steel on down.

In this case, however, I was able to visit the contributor at her home a few months after receiving her report by letter, and found that she had known about John Henry from the time Big Bend Tunnel was built, between 1870 and 1872.

Elizabeth Frost Reed, of West Virginia University, reports the following lines heard sung, in 1909, by Lewis Lytle, a Negro on her father's farm at Flat Creek, Tennessee:

When the women of the West hear of John Henry's death,

They will cry their fool selves to death.

In 1900 or 1901, Mr. Bonham heard of John Henry from a grade foreman by the name of Surface, as truthful a man as he ever met, when they were double-tracking the Norfolk and Western Railroad. "According to Surface, John Henry died after he had won the famous contest wielding two 18-pound hammers, one in each hand."³⁹⁾

Several others first heard of the steel-driver about this date. Mrs. McKnight,⁴⁰⁾ of Kentucky, writes: "My husband was very much interested in 'John Henry' ... I don't know where he got the John Henry

³⁷⁾ J. T. Baker, clergyman, in *The Bradford News Journal*, East Bradford, Va., Jan. 10, 1929.

³⁸⁾ Landisburg, W. Va.

³⁹⁾ *The Bradford News Journal*, East Bradford, Va., Jan. 10, 1929.

⁴⁰⁾ J. L. McKnight, Conway, Ky., sent a text of "John Henry" a few days before he was killed in a railroad accident, and Mrs. McKnight answered the second letter to her husband.

song, or how long he had known it. He knew this song when I first met him, more than 30 years ago." Burl McPeak,⁴¹⁾ another Kentuckian, says, "My father learnt it from a colored man on the C and O road about 1904." Mr. Murphy,⁴²⁾ of Virginia, fails to know "anything definite about John Henry, but about the year 1900 I first began to hear the song long before talking machine Records was known in this section." Mr. Barnett,⁴³⁾ of West Virginia, says, "It has been 31 years since I learned the song of John Henry." Mr. Boone,⁴⁴⁾ whose "life, up to 1925, was spent in the West Virginia hills over in the Greenbrier Valley", sends from Pennsylvania a text each of the Henry and Hardy ballads, and states: "I do not remember just the exact date I first heard the songs, but it was the colored men working on the construction of the Greenbrier Division of the C. and O. Ry. I first heard sing the songs. It seems to me it was about 1899 or 1900." Two versions of "John Hardy" in which lines of "John Henry" appear go back to this period.⁴⁵⁾ These reports indicate a wide circulation of the Henry tradition by 1900, and point to an earlier date of origin.

The same situation obtains for the tradition in the last quarter of the 19th century:

Joe Wilson, Norfolk, Va. In 1890 people around town here were singing the song about John Henry, a hammering man, hammering in the mountains four long years. I was working in an oyster house here for Fenerstein and Company, and I am 66 years old and still working for them people.

Tishie Fitzwater, Hosterman, W. Va. I have heard of him for 40 years. A old colored man told me that John Henry was a colored man, and he was a cousin to him. I have never heard any one say that John Henry was any relation to John Hardy, and I am sixty years old.

R. H. Pope, Clinton, N. C. Well I know of the song 41 years. I went to Georgia 1888, and that song was being sung by all the young men. I am now 60 years of age. In those days I knew all the words of that song but can't remember all of them now, but it was that he would die with the hammer in his hand before he would be beat driving steel ... He was a negro and a real man so I was told.

O. W. Evans, Editor of The New Castle Record, New Castle, Va. The writer is a man in the 50's, but as a boy and young man I can distinctly remember the song, the tune, and some of the verses, which as I remember were quite a number ... The negroes of forty years ago regarded him [John Henry] as a hero of their race.

W. C. Handy, New York City. As a composer of Negro music I seized on a melody that I used to hear when I was a little boy, at

⁴¹⁾ Fords Branch, Ky.

⁴²⁾ R. D. Murphy, N. P., Council, Va.

⁴³⁾ W. S. Barnett, Holstead, W. Va.

⁴⁴⁾ D. O. Boone, Knox, Pa.

⁴⁵⁾ Folk-Songs of the South, p. 178. The West Virginia Review (Aug., 1921), p. 308.

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Muscle Shoals Canal in Alabama. I printed this under the title JOHN HENRY as I had heard it.⁴⁶⁾

Andy Anderson, Huntington, W. Va. About 45 years ago I was in Morgan County, Kentucky. There was a bunch of darkeys came from Miss. to assist in driving a tunnel at the head of Big Caney Creek for the O & K. R R Company. There is where I first heard this song, as they would sing it to keep time with their hammers.

Jesse Sparks, Ethel, W. Va. My father is 87, and he says it has been a song ever since he can remember. He says he has heard his grandpa sing it, ... I am 37 years old myself, and I have been knowing it ever since I have been big enough to sing.

This testimony shows the Henry tradition widely diffused as early as the eighties, the latest date possible for its origin. The introduction of the steam drill into railroad construction in this country soon after the Civil War marks the date before which it could hardly have started. It must, then, belong to the period between these two dates.

Several of the reports connect the tradition with Big Bend Tunnel on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. George Johnston⁴⁷⁾ adds a fuller account:

John Henry was the best driver on the C. & O. He was the only man that could drive steel with two hammers, one in each hand. People came from miles to see him use the two 20 lb. hammers he had to drive with.

It seems that two different contracting companies were meeting in what is called Big Bend Tunnel. One had a steam drill while the other used man power to drill with. When they met everyone claimed that the steam drill was the greatest of all inventions, but John Henry made the remark he could sink more steel than the steam drill could. The contest was arranged and the money put up. John Henry was to get \$100.00 to beat the steam drill.

John Henry had his foreman to buy him 2 new 20 lb. hammers for the race. They were to drill 35 minutes. When the contest was over John Henry had drilled two holes 7 feet deep, which made him a total of 14 feet. The steam drill drilled one hole 9 feet which of course gave the prize to John.

When the race was over John Henry retired to his home and told his wife that he had a queer feeling in his head. She prepared his supper and immediately after eating he went to bed. The next morning when his wife awoke and told him it was time to get up she received no answer, and she immediately discovered that he had passed to the other world some time in the night. His body was examined by two Drs. from Baltimore and it was found his death was caused from a bursted blood vessel in his head.

⁴⁶⁾ Excerpt from a personal letter. Mr. Handy was born Nov. 16, 1873. *Blues An Anthology*, p. 18.

⁴⁷⁾ *Lindsides*.

The information I have given you came to me through my grandfather. He was present at Big Bend Tunnel when the contest was staged, at that time he was time keeper for the crew that John Henry was working with. I have often heard him say that his watch started and stopped the race. There was present all of the R. R. officials of the C. & O. The crowd that remained through the race at the mouth of the tunnel was estimated at 2500 a large crowd for pioneer days.

John Henry was born in Tenn. and at the time of his death he was 34 years old. He was a man weighing from 200 to 225 lbs. He was a full blooded negro, his father having come from Africa. He often said his strength was brought from Africa. He was not any relation of John Hardy as far as I know ...

Considerable verisimilitude hardly characterizes all these details. The presence of all the officials of the road, with a crowd of 2500, at the drilling-contest had better be accepted as fictional embroidery. But the purpose of this study is not to emphasize the tissue of falsehood in popular reports. Big Bend Tunnel was built by a single contractor, as will be shown later, but the "two different contracting companies" may well represent two crews of workmen. The steel-driver may have had "2 new 20 lb. hammers" and used only one at a time. Two doctors from Baltimore may have examined Henry's body, but that they came to the tunnel for that purpose seems impossible of belief. His John Henry suggests the frontier strong man, who does impossible things.

Pete Sanders, an old Negro, who claims to be from Franklin County, Virginia, has lived for many years in Fayetteville, West Virginia, where with tales old and new he often entertains youngsters about town. Long years ago he learned an Indian war whoop, and occasionally, early in the morning or late in the evening, gives it from a nearby mountaintop. He says of Henry's connection with Big Bend:

I didn't drive no steel in Big Bend Tunnel. Uncle Jeff and Eleck did though, and saw John Henry drive against the steam drill, and died in five minutes after he beat it down. They said John Henry told the shaker how to shake the steel to keep it from getting fastened in the rock so he couldn't turn it. He told him to give it two quick shakes and a twist to make the rock dust fly out of the hole.

I heard the song of John Henry driving steel against the steam drill when they were still working on the C and O. It was all amongst us when I was a boy. When we boys there in Franklin County worked on the extension of the railroad up in Pocahontas County, we carried the song with us there and carried it back home when we went. It was the leading railroad song, but they've tore it all to pieces and sp'iled it. I heard it the other day on the machine, but it ain't no ways like it used to be.

They said Big Bend Tunnel was a terrible-like place, and many men got killed there. Mules too. And they throwed the dead men and mules and all together there in that fill between the mountains. Uncle Jeff and me come in West Virginia together when I first come, and he showed me the big fill and said they tried to put Henry there first, but didn't do it

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and put him somewhere else. The dumper at the fill was the man that knowed all about it. Uncle Jeff said one day a long slab of rock that hung down from the roof fell and killed seven men. He said he seen 'em killed, and they put 'em in the fills. The people in the tunnel didn't know where they went.

Mr. Sanders, obviously, would not be the first to object to the popular account of building the Chesapeake and Ohio:

Kill a mule, buy another,
Kill a nigger, hire another.

The "extension of the railroad up in Pocahontas County", West Virginia, where he and others carried "John Henry" as the leading railroad song, is the "Greenbrier Division of the C. and O. Ry.", where Mr. Boone first heard Negroes singing it around 1900.

Erskine Phillips, editor and publisher of *The Fayette Democrat*, at Fayetteville, West Virginia, is well acquainted with the southern part of the state from several years' experience as a surveyor. He says:

I had a very interesting conversation with an old negro here sometime ago. He, Ben Turner, and his brother, Sam, are natives of Old Virginia, and migrated to West Virginia, along with hundreds of other 'niggers', to work on the C. and O. Railway. They both worked in the Big Bend Tunnel. John Henry was a powerful man, large all over, but possessed of the 'most powerful arms and shoulders I ever saw. Why! man', he said, 'his arms was as big as a stovepipe. Never seen such arms on a man in my life.'

'Could he drive steel the way the song says he could?' I asked. 'Law - - I reckon he could. Make that steel ring just like a bell. But look here. John Hardy (he spoke of him both as Henry and Hardy) had a steel turner almost as big and strong as he was. Just the same as two men driving. That man could turn the steel and hit almost as hard as John Henry could. John Henry wouldn't let no one else turn steel for him.'

The John Henry song was not the one that was generally sung by the steel-drivers. If some one were hurt or killed in the tunnel, the foreman would yell, 'All right, boys, let's hear "John Henry"'. The song had the effect of sobering the workmen, taking their minds off the accident and restoring order.

Not a single detail of this report even slightly suggests that Ben Turner ever saw either John Henry or Big Bend Tunnel. The foreman would hardly call for the ballad record of Henry's death in the tunnel as a means of "sobering the workmen" when some one else got killed there, certainly not in a tunnel without an official casualty list. Moreover, the Negroes of the community are still afraid of Henry's ghost at the tunnel, et cetera. Mr. Phillips gives this as a characteristic confusion of Henry and Hardy, but explains that they are often regarded as two different men.

Miss Elsie Scott,⁴⁹ of that section, reports her father without mentioning Hardy: "Dad worked with John Henry four years at Big

⁴⁹) Beards Fork, W. V.

Bend Tunnel. He was a Negro and left a son. Dad says he was the hero of the world. Dad knows a lot about old timers." The tunnel was built in two and a half years.

Sam Williams⁴⁹⁾ was not at Big Bend, but says that he heard of John Henry while the tunnel was under construction:

I was working at Hawk's Nest, that tunnel there on the C and O, when John Henry drove steel with the steam drill at Big Bend further down below there. People coming down the line told us about it. They said John Henry and Bill Dooland drove steel together. That's what they said. I never did see old John, but they said he was a big powerful man.

I am 84. I turned steel for the steel-drivers. When I worked at Hawk's Nest, I worked for Major Randolph.

Mike Smith,⁵⁰⁾ seventy-three years of age when he made his report in 1925, had a somewhat wider range of experiences on the road, and thinks there was such a man:

I worked in putting the C and O from White Sulphur Springs to the big cut below Kanawha Falls. I worked a while with the surveyors, but later drove steel in tunnels. I didn't see John Henry. I think there was such a man, and he drove steel. I heard about him when they were working on the Big Bend Tunnel. They talked about him driving steel there, and getting killed.

B. O. Jones,⁵¹⁾ a farmer of Albemarle County, Virginia, says that he worked the public roads in his neighborhood with "statute labor" during the seventies and eighties, and that at various times had in his gang Negroes who had worked on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. Among them he mentions Tom Hill, Tom Carey, and Ned Johnson, and says that these Negroes were continually singing "John Henry". He remembers that Tom Hill often talked of knowing Henry at Big Bend, where he claimed the steel-driver died from sickness about the time the tunnel was completed. Mr. Jones says that he worked no statute labor after 1889.

Mr. Logan,⁵²⁾ a native of Wythe County, Virginia, says that he went to Big Bend Tunnel to work when he was "between 16 and 17 years old":

I drove steel for Blevins four months at the east end of Big Bend Tunnel before they got the shafts in. Blevins was a foreman there, and he went from Smyth County right by Wythe.

I remember seeing Mike Breen and Jeff Davis. I didn't see John Henry. I didn't hear anything said about a great steel-driver.

When I went back to Ivanhoe, people would come in there from the tunnel and talk about John Henry driving steel with a steam drill. They had a song on it, and it was a whole lot longer than the John Henry song they sing now.

⁴⁹⁾ Bluefield, W. Va.

⁵⁰⁾ Hinton, W. Va.

⁵¹⁾ Ivy, Va.

⁵²⁾ J. M. Logan, Pownell, W. Va.

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I heard the song often before Big Bend Tunnel was finished. Mike Breen and Jeff Davis were very conspicuous among the workmen at Big Bend Tunnel. A full account of its construction should mention them on the first page. They taught the Negroes there how to do four days' work in one day.

W. M. Coleman,⁶³) who was retired by the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in 1926 and put on the pension list, says that he was born in Bedford County, Virginia, and soon after the "C and O" was completed started to work a track force on a section of the James River, and has worked at different places all along the line in Virginia and West Virginia:

Dick Deans, and Aaron Bailey, and Anthony Jones worked on my first crew, and off and on for a long time afterwards. They were big strapping Negroes from Campbell County, Va. They were always singing when they worked, and 'John Henry' was their best song, they liked it the best.

They worked in Big Bend Tunnel, and all of them said they'd seen John Henry drive. Dick Deans said he saw John Henry drive against the steam drill, but I don't recall anything he said about his death. They said John Henry was the most powerful man they'd ever seen, rawbony, and as black as he could be.

These Negroes are all three dead. Dick Deans was working for me at the time when he got killed on the railroad track.

A large number of these reports connect the Henry tradition with the Chesapeake and Ohio, and all but two of them place the steel-driver in the construction of Big Bend Tunnel, built between 1870 and 1872. Some of these witnesses have been employed at one time or another on the road, but all of them testify to hearing elsewhere of John Henry, not at the tunnel. The four following reports were made by men who have long service records with the railroad, two of them being employees of the company now and one on the pension list, and who testify to hearing the tradition in the immediate Big Bend community.

Cal Evans,⁶⁴) who cooked for railroad people around the tunnel off and on for forty or fifty years, and who had an opportunity, therefore, to learn its early history, states that he heard the reports of Henry's connections there when he first moved into the neighborhood, and has heard them ever since.

E. S. Scott⁶⁵) states that he works for the "C and O people, and started with them in 1879". He says:

I helped to clear out a wreck in Big Bend Tunnel in 1881. I heard the people there at the work then sing John Henry that beat the steam drill down, and I've heard it ever since then on the road, but I don't sing it and never did.

⁶³) Mt. Carbon, W. Va.
⁶⁴) Talcott, W. Va. See p. 13 ff.
⁶⁵) Montgomery, W. Va.

I remember how they talked about John Henry being such a great steel-driver, and I won't more'n about twenty years old then.

Big Bend was first arched with timber, and John Hedrick states, in the next chapter, that he had charge of that work. Falls in the tunnel caused several wrecks the first few years after its construction, and resulted in the timber being replaced by a brick arch, beginning in the early eighties. Cal Evans, already mentioned, cooked for the workmen on this job. Tom Wood⁵⁶) says that he has lived at Big Bend fifty years, worked thirteen years helping to arch the tunnel with brick, and is now on the pension list of the road. He adds, "When we were arching the tunnel along in the eighties, holes in the heading were pointed to as those John Henry drilled. People here in the neighborhood still talk about hearing John Henry driving steel in the tunnel. Any noise in the tunnel, like dropping water, is liable even now to scare some of them."

J. E. Huston is a telegraph operator for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, and is stationed at Big Bend where he has worked for the company since 1893. He was living there when the brick arch was begun, and remembers that the workmen often spoke of the holes in the heading as being drilled by John Henry:

When I was a boy, we boys here in the neighborhood used to play steel-driving. We used sticks for hammers and sang as we played, 'This old hammer killed John Henry', and so on.

The John Henry story has been in our family ever since we moved to Big Bend Tunnel in 1881. My father worked for the C and O Railroad, and they moved him to Talcott in 1881. After we moved here I heard him talk with the people around the tunnel time and again about the contest John Henry had with the steam drill.

My mother had two old Negro house servants, a man and his wife, who quite often spoke of the steel-driver. They were certain that he was buried in the big fill at the east end of the tunnel.

Obviously the old Negroes are the best chroniclers of the Henry tradition. Like the exempla of the faithful, their tales are first-hand and have the force of reality. That of William Lawson⁵⁷) is characterized by marvels that hardly need excite distrust. He reports his age as eighty-five and the place of his birth as Loudin County, Virginia, where his mother, 106 years old, still lives. During the Civil War he was on both sides, first with the Confederacy and then with the Union, but regards himself first of all as a farmer:

I was living on A. S. Massey's place up Falling Spring Valley when I went to Big Bend Tunnel in the spring. My brother Armstead was already there. I went to him there and stayed 'til time to cut corn in the fall. It was the year they put the hole through.

Armstead was along with John Christian and John Turner in the heading, and I drove steel under Armstead. He showed me where to drive. We were driving from the east end.

⁵⁶) Talcott, W. Va.

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When we met a dispute arose between the two sides about who was the first man to drive a light hole through. My brother said he did, and they fussed about it all that evening. Next morning when we started working again they started the dispute again. My brother and Will Christian (Will was from the other side) shot each other dead. Armstead said, 'Your gun ain't no bigger than mine', and they both fired about the same time. Will Christian hit my brother right plumb in the heart, and my brother hit him a little on the side further toward the middle of his breast. Both of them were dead in five minutes after the guns cracked.

I was the first to get to Armstead, and turned him over. He fell on his face. Then C. R. Mason come. They buried him on the mountainside in a government graveyard.

When the hole was put through there was a great deal of whiskey in the tunnel, and that's what started all the fuss. They fussed over who put the crowbar through first, but it was the drill.

The hole had been put through three or four months when John Henry was killed. He was the best steel-driver I ever saw. He was short and brown-skinned, and had a wife that was a bright colored woman. He was 35 or 36, and weighed 150 pounds.

When I went there they had a steam drill in the tunnel at the east end. They piped the steam in. They had a little coffee-pot engine on the outside. They didn't use it in the heading, but on the bench and on the sides.

John Henry drove steel with the steam drill one day, and beat it down, but got too hot and died. He fell out right at the mouth of the tunnel. They put a bucket of cold water on him.

His wife come to the tunnel that day, and they said she carried his body away, I don't know. I never saw anybody buried at the tunnel except my brother. They said they shipped some of them away, but I didn't see anybody shipped away. I don't know where they buried Will Christian. They didn't bury him with Armstead.

The time John Henry killed his self was his own fault, 'cause he bet the man with the steam drill he could beat him down. John Henry never let no man beat him down, but the steam drill won't no good nohow.

John Henry was always singing or mumbling something when he was whipping steel. He would sing over and over the same thing sometimes. He'd sing

'My old hammer ringing in the mountains,
Nothing but my hammer falling down.'

A colored boy 'round there added on and made up the John Henry song after he got killed, and all the muckers sung it.

C. R. Mason was the boss man at the tunnel. He was a good-hearted old man, but he was a tough man. He'd spit on you all the time he was talking to you. His son was named Clay Mason.

The historical residuum of this first-hand report is certainly not very considerable. C. R. Mason built Lewis Tunnel^{as}) not Big Bend. The two are on the same road, fifty or sixty miles apart, and were

^{as}) Tunnelling, p. 962 ff.

JOHN HENRY ON THE CHESAPEAKE AND OHIO RAILWAY

A factual basis for the Henry tradition on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in West Virginia required the employment of hand labor and machinery together, if not continuously at least on occasion, in its construction from 1870 to 1873. If rock-drilling on the road was done altogether by hand drills or altogether by steam drills, no chance for a conflict between the two kinds of work obtained, and the tradition can have no real basis there. That the opportunity, however, for such a conflict did actually exist has more than legendary support.

In the second half of the 19th century hand labor was employed widely in tunnelling, and in some cases the hand drill was used exclusively.¹⁾ Steam drills came into fairly general use in the third quarter of the century, particularly in heavy tunnelling, both in Europe and America. On the Mt. Cenis Tunnel they were put "to work in full during 1861", and remained to the completion of the tunnel ten years later.²⁾ Their next successful use was in the Hoosac Tunnel, where the Burleigh drills were introduced in 1866.³⁾ In 1870 they were introduced into the Nesquehoning Tunnel, with marked success.⁴⁾ From 1872 to 1875 the Ingersoll drills were employed with the Burleigh compressors successfully in building the Musconetcong Tunnel.⁵⁾

About this date hand drills and steam drills were brought together on several lines. Notable among these was the Cincinnati Southern, with twenty-six important tunnels. In some of them hand drills were used in the heading, and in others on the bench, supplemented by steam drills.⁶⁾ In actual practice, of course, the two types of drilling were employed together wherever the steam drill was tried out in tunnelling during its period of development, a half-century or more.

Their use together on the Chesapeake and Ohio, at some time between 1870 and 1873, is shown by the testimony of L. W. Hill, a soldier of the Confederacy, who is better known as "Dad" among railroad people around Hinton, West Virginia, where he was living when he made his report in September, 1925:

¹⁾ Port Henry Tunnel on the New York and Canada, 1874-76, and Lick Log Tunnel on the Western North Carolina Railway, 1870, were built by hand labor. Tunnelling, pp. 976, 982. In Mount Wood and Top Mill tunnels, built in 1889, "all drilling was done by hand". Journal of the Western Society of Engineers, II (1897), 49.

²⁾ Tunnelling, p. 130.

³⁾ Ibid., p. 165 ff.

⁴⁾ Ibid., pp. 166, 974.

⁵⁾ Henry S. Drinker, resident engineer of the Musconetcong Tunnel. The Railroad Gazette, VII (June 5, 1875), 228 ff.

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here. He says that there "are undoubtedly some vulgar versions of John Henry in circulation, but none has ever fallen into my net. I can truthfully say that the following stanzas contain the only 'low-down' I have ever heard on John Henry."³⁹) The following are his first two:

John Henry had a little woman,
Name was Ida Red.

John Henry had a little woman,
She sleeps in my own bed.

Old John Henry was a railroad man,
Washed his face in the frying pan,
Combed his head with the wagon wheel,
Died with the toothache in his heel.

He probably regards these stanzas as late adaptations, not basically a part of the Henry tradition, and as well his third example which is much longer. He might have added at least three others of equal value from his own texts:

John Henry told his woman,
'I've always did as I please.'
She said, 'If you go with that other bitch,
I will not let you see no ease.'⁴⁰)

John Henry had a little woman,
Just as pretty as she could be;
They's just one objection I's got to her:
She want every man she see.⁴¹)

'Where did you get your pretty little dress?
The hat you wear so fine?'
'Got my dress from a railroad man,
Hat from a man in the mine.'⁴²)

Possibly the miner and the railroad man were local merchants of a very neighborly sort, and one, if not both, of them a Santa Claus; but the hat and dress would seem to indicate at least that she was not entirely disappointed.

He adds, in this connection, his confession of faith in sex symbolism in "John Henry":

Realizing that John Henry contains excellent symbolism from the Freudian point of view, I have kept a watch for such versions, but I have never heard one. However, Prof. English Bagby, of the Department of Psychology of the University of North Carolina, tells me that he has talked to at least one Negro who definitely interpreted John Henry in terms of sexual symbolism⁴³).

³⁹) John Henry, p. 140 ff.
⁴⁰) Ibid., p. 127.
⁴¹) Ibid., p. 124.
⁴²) Ibid., p. 126.
⁴³) Ibid., p. 140.

Perhaps he watched too closely to be able to evaluate objectively all that fell into his net. One of his texts contains these lines:

John Henry had a little wife
Who were steel corn fed⁴¹).

Possibly "steel corn" means only hard corn, and he has "never heard one". The contributor, of course, is the only authority for the text, but he, like the editor, can answer only for himself, not for the other thousand singers of the same version. If the "drill", "a little piece of steel", "driving steel", and "bucking steel" have Freudian values in possible connections, as his psychologist would seem to recognize, he allows none of them such a bearing in his work.

While Dr. Johnson insists on speaking "truthfully", one may ask, in view of his handling thus such materials, how fully he realized that "John Henry contains excellent symbolism from the Freudian point of view". His answer, though it hardly seems necessary, is vigorously expressed in his review of Roark Bradford's *John Henry*, a more recent treatment of the Henry tradition:

And now Roark Bradford has written a book about John Henry --- but not the John Henry of the legend. His is a jazz version, so to speak ... The old John Henry was a tragic, almost a sacred, figure. He symbolized man versus the machine. This new John Henry is a tragic personality also, but in so far as he symbolizes anything it is man versus woman⁴²).

Dr. Johnson had explained earlier that the word jazz deserves to head the list in Negro song for the "act of cohabitation".⁴³ One thing at a time and that done well must be the rule for his John Henry, the good man hero who did nothin' but work. A "parlor" hero of the good old days when a leg was a limb and cold hands meant a warm heart. Parson Weems denied his Washington and Marion less. That it was not necessary for John Henry, widely celebrated for half a century by the "lower" tenth of back alleys and construction camps, to borrow his sex from the upper crust requires no proof.

In handling dialect, Dr. Johnson seems equally authoritative. A sufficient illustration of his success in the field is his treatment of a "big wheel turnin'" as a "corruption of Big Bend Tunnel", with the explanation that a "common dialect pronunciation of 'tunnel' is 'turnel'".⁴⁴ While a "big wheel turnin'" might mark a stanza or version of the ballad as corrupt, I prefer to regard it as a substitution for "Big Bend Tunnel", without the necessity of finding a dialectal value in "turnel" for "tunnel". Nevertheless, he is able to characterize the dialect of Roark Bradford's *John Henry* as a "sort that never was on land or sea".⁴⁵ And he is probably right at that.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 119.

⁴² The Nation, Oct. 7, 1931.

⁴³ The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, April, 1927.

⁴⁴ John Henry, p. 86 (n).

⁴⁵ The Nation, Oct. 7, 1931.

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Ibid., p. 86.
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Folk-Songs
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In the field of popular literature, as well, the innocence of Dr. Johnson is too evident from statements such as the following: "When John Hardy came on the scene, only a few snatches of John Henry remained in general circulation in West Virginia."⁴⁹ He gives no data to show that he had made a thorough investigation of "John Henry" in that state for the last decade of the 19th century, or the occasion when "John Hardy" came on the scene. Moreover, on the basis of material in his hands at the time he might have said, without serious objection, that "John Henry" had travelled far enough to escape complete confusion with "John Hardy" when the latter ballad began its circulation in oral tradition, and that would have been sufficient for the point he apparently wanted to make, an "explanation of the mixed versions of John Hardy which Cox has found".

His statement that the "author of John Hardy ... must have been familiar with the structure of John Henry, for he cast his product in exactly the same mold",⁵⁰ is made without giving any evidence that "John Hardy" had the author. The observed fact of their structural similarity hardly settles the matter of individual or multiple authorship for one or both of the ballads. If "John Henry" developed by stages, "required more time in the making",⁵¹ as he supposes, why does he find it necessary to assume the author for "John Hardy"? Does he contribute anything by such an addition, without reference, to the earlier statement, "Les deux chansons se trouvent être d'une structure analogue"?⁵² This statement allows the possibility that the two ballads derive their structural pattern from a common source, that "John Hardy" had its origin in West Virginia although when it "came on the scene, only a few snatches of John Henry remained in general circulation" in that state, or that the author of "John Henry" was familiar with the structure of "John Hardy" for he cast his product in exactly the same mold.

The separation of the two ballads is, perhaps, the best thing Dr. Johnson does in his discussion, and that is not altogether satisfactory. His materials and methods are hardly sufficient for his conclusions.

With two tunes of "John Hardy" from white people and several of "John Henry" from Negroes, he proceeds thus: "John Hardy is simple, deliberate, and puts one in mind of the conventional English ballad sung by the white mountain people. John Henry is faster, is syncopated, and is much more typically Negroid than John Hardy."⁵³ Doubtlessly the tunes and rhythms of his examples are somewhat different, but they are drawn too largely from phonograph records, college student, and other soloists, with improvements by the editor as the following pages will show, to have much value, and

⁴⁹ John Henry, p. 64.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 69 ff.

⁵² Folk-Songs du Midi des États-Unis, p. 104.

⁵³ John Henry, pp. 66-67.

such treatment of the two ballads does not take properly into account the frequency of Negroes singing "John Hardy" and white people "John Henry", both with notable racial variations and often a mixture of the two ballads in their performances.

He publishes a tune of "John Henry" from Robert Mason, who can pick his twelve-string box "in more ways than a farmer can whip a mule",⁵⁴⁾ and another from Leon R. Harris, a rambler who has worked in "railroad grading camps from the Great Lakes to Florida and from the Atlantic to the Missouri River", who has wherever he worked "always found someone who could and would sing of John Henry", and who says, "The song is sung to many an air or tune, and hardly any two singers sing it alike."⁵⁵⁾ Such re-ness in conclusions based on a few unrepresentative tunes.

Dr. Johnson, moreover, agrees that "the very essence of the work song is its fluidity, its adaptability to various kinds and speeds of work", and that a "work song tune cannot be recorded with absolute accuracy".⁵⁶⁾ In his earlier discussion, he notes the inconsistency of the singer:

When the recorder thinks that he has finally succeeded in getting a phrase down correctly and asks the singer to repeat it... he often finds that the response is quite different from any previous rendition. Requests for further repetition may bring out still other variations or a return to the previous version. Again, after the notation has been made from the singing of the first stanza of a song, the collector may be chagrined to find that none of the other stanzas is sung to exactly the same tune.⁵⁷⁾

He adds in the next paragraph even greater difficulties for the collector in recording "group singing in its native haunts":

He cannot hope to catch by ear alone all of the parts -- and there are undoubtedly six or eight of many of these songs -- that go into the making of those rare harmonies which only a group of Negro workers can produce... He must be contented with securing the leading part of the song and harmonizing it later as best he can.

These explanations seem to place accurate tunes of the two ballads beyond the reach of Dr. Johnson.

Whatever he may think about the original authorship of "John Henry" and "John Hardy", he will hardly deny that they have been through the seasoning process of group-singing, often with an exchange of units from one to the other and confusions with other songs of similar rhythmic technique, with shifts in the "six or eight" parts for different occasions, resulting in first one part and then another holding the lead. A member of such a group, or any other soloist, can take only one of these parts at a time, as in the case of his collector, and must harmonize "it later as best he can", with

⁵⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 90 ff. Cf. p. 17 ff.

⁵⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 69 ff.

⁵⁷⁾ *Negro Workaday Songs*, p. 242 ff.

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the possibility of echoing the group or various groups in the several stanzas of the song. That all such soloists, or later groups, take the same leading part for their renditions is extremely doubtful. That the original "John Henry" and "John Hardy" could come through this process without modification is equally doubtful. It follows, therefore, that if one succeeds in bringing together enough examples to show tune and rhythmic differences in their survivals, they will not be sufficient for the original character of the two ballads and cannot establish their separation.

Furthermore, their original separation on the basis of current tune variations ignores too much ballad tradition. If the author of "John Hardy", as Dr. Johnson insists, was familiar with the structure of "John Henry" and cast his product in exactly the same mold, in all probability he copied his "John Henry" tune also, or rather that of his pattern. Possibly the author was one of a large group of ballad-singers who recognize only one tune for their entire repertory. Possibly the author, or some singer, transmitted the ballad as a "ballet" without tune notation, and all extant versions derive from this source. These are possibilities.

Weaknesses along such lines in the material on which Dr. Johnson bases his separation of "John Henry" from "John Hardy" place his thesis in an unfavorable light, and no great improvement of his case can be made from an examination of his tunes themselves. That they do not represent the full character of the two ballads requires no further explanation. His methods, though, of obtaining them have an importance, and they are well illustrated in his example from Odell Walker, his Chapel Hill authority for "John Henry".

He presents two examples of Mr. Walker's singing the first stanza of a single version of "John Henry",⁵⁸) with tone and rhythmic variations, and fails to say which of the performances is the correct one. Possibly he asked for the second singing of the stanza and failed to observe that his soloist had changed drinks. Possibly he had only one rendition, and as editor harmonized "it later as best he can." Nevertheless, he gives both examples as Negroid, and uses them to show a difference between the two ballads.

In fact, he must have succeeded in getting at least three performances by Mr. Walker, as lines 3 and 4 of the three printings of the first stanza of his version show:⁵⁹)

'Fore he'd let the steam drill beat him down,
Die wid his hammer in his han'.

An' befo' he'd let the steam-drill beat him down,
Die with the hammer in his han'.

And before he'd let the steam drill beat him down
He'd die with his hammer in his hand.

⁵⁸) Ibid., p. 248; John Henry, p. 100.

⁵⁹) Negro Workaday Songs, pp. 248, 225; John Henry, p. 100.

Possibly these specimens, with their several tunes, are faster, more syncopated, and "much more typically Negroid" than his "John Hardy" examples from white people. Apparently he published Mr. Walker's version in two other places, with further notable variations.⁶⁰⁾ Such practices must of necessity affect the evidence drawn from his texts for any purpose.

My request, in a recent note on John Henry,⁶¹⁾ for corrections by Dr. Johnson of a series of misrepresentations in the testimonial data he published from the Big Bend Tunnel neighborhood has had no answer, and by way of throwing some light on his methods of handling such material a few of them may be pointed out more fully. One can easily understand that the slightest variation, conscious or otherwise, in these field reports would have significant results under his system of classifying them as "positive, negative, or indifferent" testimony.⁶²⁾

That of Cal Evans he presents as follows:

When the tunnel was under construction he was a youngster, not quite old enough to take part in the work. He thinks there might have been a steel driver there named John Henry, but he never saw him and could remember nothing about him except what he heard later. He stated that while the story might be true he was inclined to believe that it was not⁶³⁾. Dr. Johnson would have no great difficulty in classifying this report for John Henry at Big Bend Tunnel as "negative, or indifferent", but if it is to have any bearing on the connection of the steel-driver with Big Bend, and on the larger question of his reality, something more definite might be expected from Mr. Evans. One would like to know why he failed to see John Henry, what he heard later, when and where he heard it. After investigating the Henry tradition there, one would certainly ask what story Evans doubts the truth of. Does he doubt the truth of the story of John Henry driving steel in the tunnel, the story of his drilling-contest there, the story of his death as a result of the contest, or the story of his body being thrown into the big fill at the east end of the tunnel? Or does he doubt the truth of the story that Henry's ghost is still driving steel in the tunnel?

Like many of the older Negroes of the community, Cal Evans, according to his own statement and that of his wife, followed the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad into that part of the state. He was a native of Albemarle County, Virginia, worked first on the road near White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, later near Huntington, in the western part of the state, and around 1875 began cooking at the roundhouse in Hinton, eight miles from Big Bend. In 1876 he married a woman of Orange County, Virginia. They made their home

⁶⁰⁾ The Southern Workman, LVI, 159; Ebony and Topaz (ed. C. S. Johnson), p. 48. Cf. John Henry, p. 153.

⁶¹⁾ American Speech, VI (Dec., 1930), 144 ff.

⁶²⁾ John Henry, p. 34.

⁶³⁾ Ibid., p. 37.

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in Hinton, where Mr. Evans continued cooking at the roundhouse until arching the tunnel with brick was begun in the early eighties.⁶⁴) Then he moved to Big Bend to cook for the workmen, and remained there. He had no opportunity, therefore, to see John Henry drive steel in building the tunnel between 1870 and 1872.

His contact with the tunnel for half a century made it possible for him to learn the stories of John Henry there, and his practice of telling them is a matter of general knowledge in the community. Although he objects to the reports of Henry's ghost driving steel in the tunnel, and of Henry's death as a result of the drilling-contest, what he really believes can be understood only through an acquaintance with the man. He is one of the Negroes at Big Bend generally known to be afraid of John Henry at night, -- not that he admits it of course, -- but this fact must not be overlooked in reporting his distrust of the ghost story, and of any other part of the tradition, such as Henry's spectacular death from the contest, which seems to him to contribute directly to it. He says that he saw, when the railroad was being double-tracked in the eighties, a human skeleton unearthed in the road bed over the big fill at the east end of the tunnel, where the dead from building the tunnel were reported to be buried at night;⁶⁵) but he objects to the skeleton as that of John Henry. He accepts, however, as factual the reports of Henry working in the tunnel and his contest with the steam drill.

Verification of this explanation of Mr. Evans can be made at Big Bend with no great difficulty. W. M. White,⁶⁶) a student in West Virginia University, who since he was a small boy has had a camp on Evans' place, about a hundred yards below the east portal of the tunnel, where he employs Evans to cook for him during several weeks every summer, and where he has listened for hours in the evenings to Evans' tales of John Henry, says that Mr. Evans will not go alone at night to the tunnel, and that in going at night to Talcott, a small village just above Big Bend, he paddles his boat up Greenbrier River in order to avoid contact with Henry's ghost.

Mr. Evans is much less courageous than Mr. Anderson, the Negro keeper or care-taker of the tunnel, who has what people in the neighborhood call a "pension job". On my first trip to Big Bend, in the fall of 1925, I saw Mr. Anderson pushing a wheelbarrow filled with rubbish out of the west end of the tunnel, and called to him from the embankment fifty feet above and asked if he had seen John Henry while he was on the inside. He answered, with a good Negro laugh, that he had no faith in the stories of John Henry, and advised seeing John Hedrick, the man he regarded as knowing the facts in the Henry tradition.

⁶⁴) J. H. Miller says that Big Bend Tunnel caved in during March, 1883, with the result that the "railroad company was forced to arch the tunnel with brick". *History of Summers County, West Virginia*, 1908.

⁶⁵) See pp. 37, 47.

⁶⁶) Raleigh, W. Va.

Mr. Anderson explained how, in spite of the local fear of Henry's ghost, he had taken charge when he came there more than thirty years before. He had had his most exciting experience on walking through the tunnel soon after his arrival. About half the distance through he had heard John Henry driving steel, and had experienced some difficulty in waiting for a closer acquaintance with the steel-driver; yet he had been able to discover that what he heard was water dropping above the roof of the tunnel.⁶⁷⁾

It soon became clear, however, that his stories of John Henry were confined to the death of the steel-driver as a result of the drilling-contest and the subsequent escapades of his ghost around the tunnel. Mr. Anderson believes that a man by the name of John Henry worked in the tunnel, and seems to think everybody else should. Like Mr. Evans, though, he was not at the tunnel while it was under construction and knows only what he has heard about the steel-driver.

As respects the Henry tradition, Evans and Anderson are both "positive" and "negative", but perhaps would cause the classifier no great trouble. They accept certain parts of the tradition as factual, and regard certain other parts as "stories". The investigator, therefore, who has a use for their beliefs about Henry must be on his guard to avoid misrepresenting them, as seems to be the case in Dr. Johnson's report of Evans' testimony.

The same explanation can hardly be made in the case of John Hedrick.⁶⁸⁾ Dr. Johnson says that Mr. Hedrick "did not work on the tunnel". The reaction of Mr. Hedrick to this statement is about what one might expect from a Confederate soldier after telling him that he was not in the Civil War. Mr. Hedrick insists that he began with the first gangs at Big Bend and stayed on the job until the tunnel was finished. He quotes Mr. Hedrick as saying, "I did not see the contest myself, but I heard the men talking about it right after it took place." He fails to say where Mr. Hedrick was at the time of the contest, or where he heard the men talking about it. And it is important to know the meaning of right after it took place". Following this expression in the testimony, Mr. Hedrick speaks in terms of years, not in terms of days or hours. Mr. Hedrick, however, claims that while the drilling-contest was taking place inside the tunnel he was "taking up timber" to be used for arching, and heard Henry "singing and driving" in the contest. Dr. Johnson is also misleading in his further statement, "Mr. Hedrick could not say whether John Henry died after the contest, although his impression was that he did not." Mr. Hedrick is quite definite on the point, and does say with emphasis that Henry did not die immediately after the drilling-contest. This is the point on which Mr. Anderson, mentioned above, refers to Mr. Hedrick as authority in disposing of the factual basis for Henry's ghost in the tunnel. If Dr. Johnson had actually interviewed Mr. Hedrick, as he seems to expect the reader to believe,

⁶⁷⁾ See p. 37.

⁶⁸⁾ John Henry, p. 40.

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possibly he would have made a different report. Mr. Hedrick and his daughter's family with whom he lives in Hinton, West Virginia, claim that the interview was not held.

Dr. Johnson, of course, will have his own explanation for these discrepancies in the testimony he published from Big Bend. But he will hardly find it necessary to explain why, after quoting Neal Miller as using the word "contest" for Henry's drilling-contest, he states on the following page that Mr. Miller "never spoke of the episode as a contest, but as a test",⁶⁹ or to explain the variations in his two printings of Mr. Miller's report, the third and last of the series I shall examine in this study.

The first printing of this piece of testimony is easily accessible.⁷⁰ The second is as follows:

This man, known as Neal Miller, told me in plain words how he had come to the tunnel with his father at 17, how he carried water and drills for the steel drivers, how he saw John Henry every day, and, finally, all about the contest between John Henry and the steam drill.

'When the agent for the steam drill company brought the drill here,' said Mr. Miller, 'John Henry wanted to drive against it. He took a lot of pride in his work and he hated to see a machine take the work of men like him.'

'Well, they decided to hold a test to get an idea of how practical the steam drill was. The test went on all day and part of the next day.'

'John Henry won. He wouldn't rest enough, and he overdid. He took sick and died soon after that.'

Mr. Miller described the steam drill in detail. I made a sketch of it and later when I looked up pictures of the early steam drills, I found his description correct. I asked people about Mr. Miller's reputation, and they all said, 'If Neal Miller said anything happened, it happened.'⁷¹

The first three quoted sentences of the second printing have no near parallels in that of the first. The fourth quoted sentence of the second is a statement of fact, and differs materially from the quoted statement of this fact in the first printing:

1st: "The test lasted over a part of two days."

2nd: "The test went on all day and part of the next day."

These are important differences in the facts stated and in the form of statement. The fifth and sixth quoted sentences of the second printing are statements of fact, and statements of these facts are quoted in the first printing; but the two printings show no similarity of form. The seventh and last sentence quoted from Mr. Miller in the second printing is also a statement of fact, but differs from the corresponding quotation of the first printing:

1st: "As well as I remember... he took sick and died from fever soon after that."

2nd: "He took sick and died soon after that."

⁶⁹ John Henry, p. 42.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40 ff.

⁷¹ Welch Daily News, (Feb. 22, 1930), Welch, W. Va.

The qualified statement of Henry's death "from fever" in the first becomes an unqualified statement in the second, and the cause of death is omitted.

These are notable discrepancies in two printings of the same report by the same editor. Does he mean to offer the first or the second printing as the correct testimony of Mr. Miller? Perhaps he has a third version not less correct than the other two. Until he designates the authentic one, however, nothing can be done by way of testing its keeping with the facts as Mr. Miller claims to know them.

The materials Dr. Johnson uses seem less important in his hands than his shifting point of view. In 1929 he prefers to believe in the reality of John Henry, but is "not irrevocably wedded to this position".⁷²⁾ In 1930, without additions to his bibliography of 1929, he is convinced of Henry's reality,⁷³⁾ and for his stronger position relies heavily on Mr. Miller's testimony, the only one of the series in question reproduced in this connection. In its second printing he prepares for his sweeping conclusion by the addition of new information such as John Henry "took a lot of pride in his work", "hated to see a machine take the work of men like him", and "wanted to drive against it", and by a general toning up of the report by omitting expressions such as "as well as I remember". Moreover, he changes the quoted statement, "If Neal Miller says it happened, then it must have happened",⁷⁴⁾ to a stronger one, "If Neal Miller said anything happened, it happened".

If Dr. Johnson toned up data for a stronger position when he became convinced in 1930 that Henry was real, in all probability he toned down the same data when he was "not irrevocably wedded to this position" in 1929, possibly because he was not fully divorced from his earlier spouse, his mythical John Henry of 1926.⁷⁵⁾ His misrepresentations of Evans and Hedrick weaken their testimony for Henry's reality: those only slightly affecting their evidence affect it negatively, and some of them are more than slight. He almost succeeds in taking Mr. Hedrick out of the picture, and yet the value of Mr. Hedrick's correct report is about equal to that of Mr. Miller, the man he sets off as his important witness, his "One man against the mountain of negative evidence!"⁷⁶⁾ a mountain of his own creation through manipulations under his system of classifying field reports as "positive, negative, or indifferent". After aiding all along the line toward such a consummation, he admits that one can make the evidence "lean either way".⁷⁷⁾ What was his purpose in such a method?

If one assumes that Dr. Johnson, in 1929, is masquerading in John Henry, capitalizing the wide distrust of testimonial data

⁷²⁾ John Henry, p. 54.

⁷³⁾ Welch Daily News, Welch, W. Va., Feb. 22, 1930.

⁷⁴⁾ John Henry, p. 53.

⁷⁵⁾ Negro Workaday Songs, p. 221.

⁷⁶⁾ John Henry, p. 53.

⁷⁷⁾ Ibid., p. 51.